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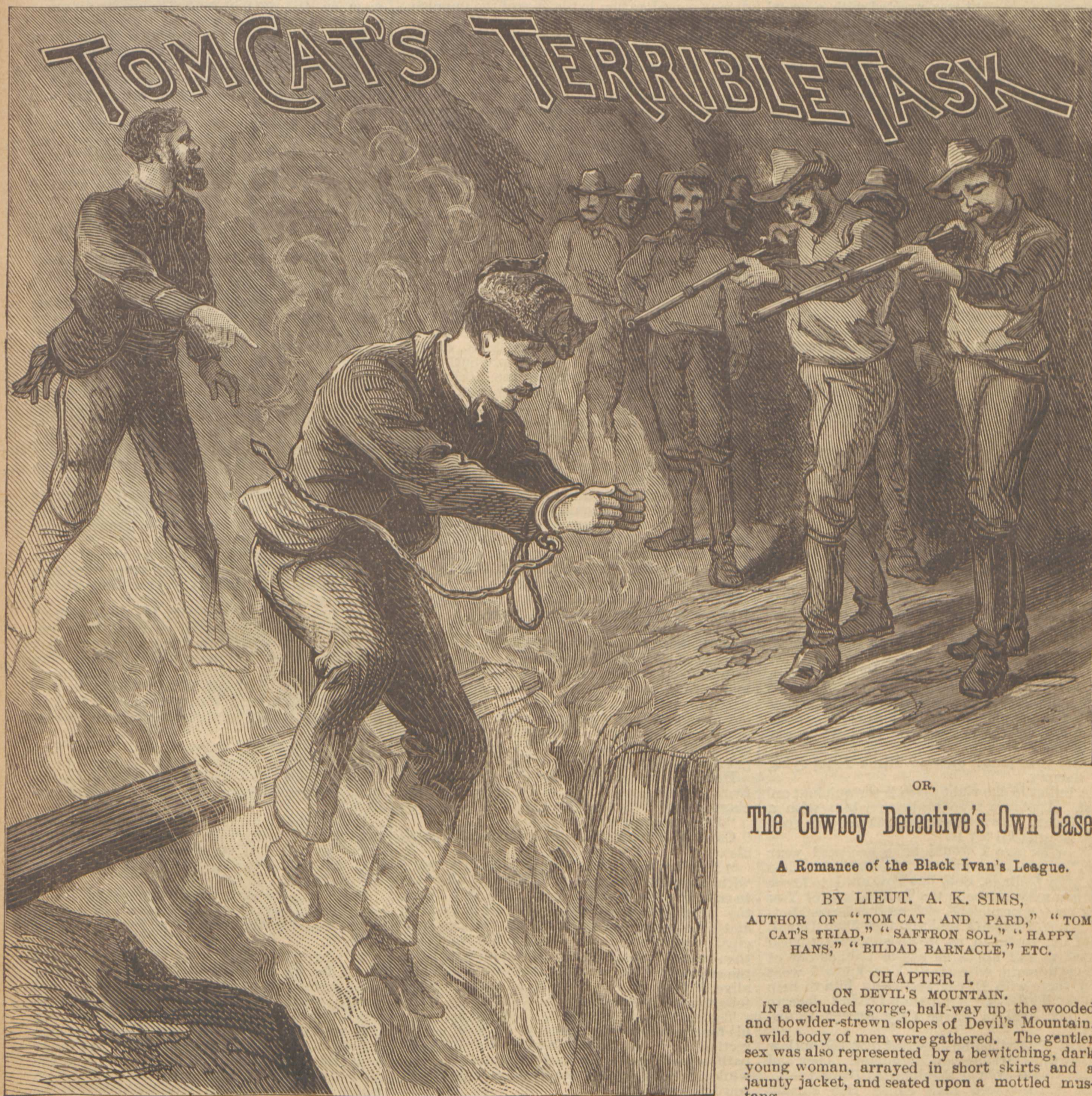
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THE TOM-CAT SPRUNG FROM THE PLANK AND DISAPPEARED IN THE DEPTHS!

OR,

## The Cowboy Detective's Own Case.

A Romance of the Black Ivan's League.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,

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### CHAPTER I.

#### ON DEVIL'S MOUNTAIN.

In a secluded gorge, half-way up the wooded and boulder-strewn slopes of Devil's Mountain, a wild body of men were gathered. The gentler sex was also represented by a bewitching, dark young woman, arrayed in short skirts and a jaunty jacket, and seated upon a mottled mustang.

In general, the faces of the outlaws were

stamped with lines that told of crime, dissipation and wasted years.

Their leader was a black-whiskered, black-eyed man, with a look on his dark and not unhandsome countenance that revealed a savage and unbending will. His nationality was difficult to guess. Many supposed him to be a native of Southern Russia. Wherever born, there could be little doubt that he was linked by blood to that strange and wandering race, the Gypsies. Indeed, he sometimes boasted that he was a Romany.

His name was Ivan Thornpath, but he was known throughout the silver mining districts as Black Ivan the Road-Agent. The wild, dark beauty, with heavy, black eyebrows and masses of raven hair was his daughter Hazel. Her beauty was of a fierce, dazzling, fascinating kind, that caused her to be both loved and feared.

Black Ivan evidently had assembled his band for the purpose of discussing some question of signal interest. This was shown by the eager manner with which the men crowded about him.

"Report! Report!" they cried.

"The same old story!" he answered, sweeping the circle of faces with a scowl. "The boys were sent up, in spite of our money and lawyers."

The announcement was greeted with a growl of commingled fear and rage.

"Yes! We failed again, though I poured out money like water. When I sent the summons, three days ago, for you to meet me here, I felt sure I would be able to bring the boys with me. But the cases against them were too strong. I couldn't do anything, though I spent almost enough money to buy a silver mine. That infernal Tom-cat had raked the country with a fine-tooth comb for evidence, and piled it up in a way that was simply irresistible. If we are not careful he will have us all by the heels before the month is out. I visited Silver City in disguise, and then had to skulk about the streets at night, like a coyote."

The low growl swelled into a howl of anger.

"Down with the Tom-cat!" shouted a fierce voice. "We'll hev ter kill the skunk!"

Black Ivan's features relaxed into a cruel smile.

"That is easier said than done, perhaps. He seems proof against assassination. Some of the money I spent went in that line. He's a reckless devil and a dead shot. A good many of the men who have tried to kill him are inhabiting graveyards, now. Besides, he has scores of friends in that town, and the fellow that laid him out would be strung up in short order, if he didn't make tracks lively."

"He has spies everywhere, too. It was shown at the trial that one of them was with the boys when they held up the stage. It may be that there's one in this crowd! Who's to tell?"

He again swept the circle of faces, with fiery eyes, and each man looked at his comrade in a suspicious way.

"Of course, none of us want to be jail-birds! But, in such a case, how can we tell what to do? If we decide to stop the career of the Tom-cat, and settle upon a plan, how are we to tell that he will not know all about it inside of twenty-four hours?"

At this the owner of the fierce voice pushed forward.

"Somethin' hev got to be done!" he asserted. "Either thet, er we must pull up stakes. An' thet's what I ain't in favor of, long's bizness is good an' thar's plenty o' dust goin' over the trails. I say, lay out the Tom-cat an' then we've got easy sailin'!"

"And your plan?" queried Black Ivan, eying him sharply.

"A bullet in the right place is the quickest an' safest. App'int a man to lay fer him with a Winchester. It's a resky job, but fer the good o' the League I'll try it!"

"A week ago I would have accepted your offer!" with a keen glance. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, Bob, but how am I to know that you may not be in the Tom-cat's pay? You think me too suspicious, eh?" as Bob flushed hotly. "But, I haven't told you that Dick Duval, one of our best men, as we all supposed, turned against us and appeared at the trial as one of Tom-cat's main witnesses. You know I went down there with Duval, expecting him to help me clear the boys. After that I didn't dare to show my head in Silver City except in disguise."

A sort of terrified hush settled over the outlaw band at this startling announcement. They had trusted Duval even as they trusted Black Ivan.

The fierce-voiced man called Bob shrunk

visibly, as if he feared the suspicions of his comrades would be turned against him. And that, as he well knew, meant death.

So deep was the hush that settled over the band, and so impregnated were the minds of the men with distrust, that each feared to lift up his voice or venture a word of advice.

Hazel Thornpath, the black-browed beauty, sectre in the confidence and affection of her father, courageously broke the spell.

"The men have lost their heads, Lieutenant Carlton!" with a light but mirthless laugh, as she shook her raven hair. "Give them a bit of advice, pray! Surely a man of your intelligence ought to find a way out of this snarl."

Tim Carlton, the man addressed, was a young athlete, with a strongly-marked face and a stubby growth of beard. He was seated on a bowler holding his horse's bridle-rein loosely in his right hand. Although he had been with the band but a few weeks he was thoroughly trusted, both by Black Ivan and Hazel. The latter regarded him with a feeling warmer even than mere friendship.

"Suggestions are sometimes like over-sharp swords!" responded Carlton, with a calm, self-contained smile. "One may injure himself by handling them."

He spoke like a man of some education; and this may have gained for him more than ordinary consideration in the eyes of the impulsive Hazel.

"If you have anything to say, Carlton, spit it out; don't go beating about the bush that way!" commanded the road-brigand chief.

"Is it safe, do you think?" looking Black Ivan full in the face with that quizzical smile. "No man likes to be thought a possible traitor just because he chances to have a few ideas in his head."

"Go on! We will not convict you till we know you to be guilty."

Thus adjured, Tim Carlton, the lieutenant of the band, arose, still holding the bridle-rein, and stretched his athletic form to its full height.

"I don't know that I have any very original notions to offer," he began. "And I should not have spoken at all had I not been called on by Miss Hazel. For, say what you will, brothers of the League, this is a time when suspicions are easily and unduly aroused. Which is the more to be dreaded—the heavy hand of the Tom-cat or the dangerous mistrust of this League, I don't know. Under present conditions, I believe I would prefer the heavy hand of the Tom-cat. I might escape him, but I couldn't escape your unbrotherly vengeance."

"And yet your distrust is perfectly natural, however perilous it may be to any single individual. Who would have thought Duval was playing a double part? I trusted him fully. And as our chief has well said, there may be other traitors among us."

That angry growl again vibrated on the air.

"Of course it is impossible for us to continue business at the old stand, so long as the Tom-cat is able to strike a blow. Therefore, I have two things to advise: The first, which I know you will not accept, is disbandment."

"Never!" exclaimed Black Ivan; and his words were echoed with fierce vigor.

"The other is to kill the Tom-cat. He is not invincible, and, I dare say, his breast will no more turn a bullet than will mine. As our captain thinks that no man is to be trusted singly—and in that, no doubt he is wise—why not advance upon Silver City in a body? If there is a spy among us that would prevent him from slipping off and giving the ex-cowboy warning. We can lie in ambush near the town and doubtless get a shot at him, sooner or later."

He sat down, and murmurs of approval came from the band, while the black-browed beauty clapped her pretty hands wickedly.

"Bravo!" she cried.

Carlton's suggestion seemed to please the chief, also.

"You have a head for planning, Carlton!" with an approving nod. "However, allow me to enlarge upon your scheme. We will divide the band into two parties. You will lead one and I the other. We will ambush the two principal trails out of the town, and if we do not then succeed in our efforts we will have to leave the country. But, we will succeed! Take him alive, if you can, for I would like to drop the fellow's carcass into the whirlpool."

These points being settled, Black Ivan divided his force and led one division in an angling direction, down the mountain-side. Hazel Thornpath set off alone for their mountain retreat, while Carlton led the other division directly toward Silver City.

## CHAPTER II.

### A HASTY SHOT.

It was past noon when Carlton set out, and as Silver City was more than fifty miles away, with a rough and broken country intervening, it was utterly impossible for him to reach it that night. Still, he hurried his men on at a rapid gait, as if anxious to reduce those miles to the smallest possible number before the coming of darkness.

"If we can get there before the other party and succeed in capturing or killing the fellow while they are yet on the way, it will be a big feather in our caps!" he said, by way of encouragement.

"Ay, that it will!" his followers chimed in, catching something of his enthusiasm. "We'll hev the feller dead to rights 'fore to-morrer night."

This, it must be remembered, was *en route!* When they really gained the vicinity of Silver City, their courage somewhat evaporated. The ex-cowboy, known everywhere as the Texas Tom-cat, had gone regularly into the detective business, and had been so shrewd and successful that his name was now a terror to villains of every degree, from the Rio Grande to the gold fields of the Black Hills. He had recently caused the arrest and conviction of several members of the Devil's Mountain League of highwaymen, and the fact tended to inspire his name with still greater terrors.

They camped that night near a spring, in a small grove of trees, having by hard and late traveling, covered considerably over half the distance. Before daybreak they were again in the saddle, and by nine o'clock Silver City was in sight.

Carlton, keeping his men well protected, placed them in ambush by the principal trail leading toward the mountains, their horses being concealed in a gorge a few miles back.

"I'm glad Ivan gave us *this* trail to watch!" he observed, when his men were well secreted.

"The chances are that if Tom-cat leaves the town at all, he will go out this way. It is traveled more than the other."

His followers looked somewhat uncomfortable at this information, courageous as they had professed to be at starting.

The Texas Tom-cat was to them a real living terror; his cat-howls carried consternation to their wicked souls. Unless they could shoot him from cover it was pretty certain that some of them would lay down their lives before he was captured or slain.

"We'll not attempt to take him alive, should he come this way," remarked Carlton, interpreting their looks. "It would be entirely too risky. A well-aimed bullet is the safest, by long odds. I know the captain wants him brought in alive, but there's no use of losing men to accomplish it."

Carlton evidently was the most bloodthirsty of the lot. He seemed to hope sincerely that the Tom-cat would pass along there that day, and thus fall a victim to their rifles.

But he was doomed to disappointment. The day passed, and though many men were seen going to and from Silver City, the Tom-cat was not among them.

"I wish we could hear from the other party," the lieutenant soliloquized, as night came on, and some of the outlaws started away to look after the horses. "It may be that Captain Ivan has encountered him. I hardly think so, though. That Tom-cat is a sly one, a perfect lynx, and it's a hard thing to lead him into an ambush, no matter how cunningly it may be arranged."

The night passed uneventfully. When they began their watch next day, Carlton openly expressed his belief that it would be impossible to lure the cowboy into the trap they had prepared.

"We'll continue the watch, of course, according to orders, but it's my opinion we'll never get a shot at him. If we are ever to lay him out, some one will have to go straight to his home in Silver City and do the job there."

There was a general clamor against this, each man fearing that if such a course was decided on, he would be the one selected for the perilous attempt.

"I never ask a man to do something I'm afraid to try myself," Carlton averred, somewhat scornfully, as he noted the uneasy looks of his followers. "I know that the man who enters Silver City on such an errand will be lucky if he gets out alive. Still, I'm ready to make the effort. It's rather against orders, but I'll go and risk good coming of it. To-night, if the Tom-cat doesn't come this way before, I will go where he is. There's no use in fooling when the

danger is so great. The fellow *must* be silenced or we will have to disband."

This personal assumption of all the risks quieted the clamor, and no further objection was offered.

Carlton was very uneasy and restless that afternoon. Several times he ascended a high rock and stared away toward the town.

"I 'low, frum the way he acts, the boss thinks he kin draw the p'izen critter to him by peekin' toward the city!" one of the men observed. "I can't reely say't I'm sorry he ain't come by this trail. Prob'ly Ivan's got 'im. I do hope he hes."

"Yas," chimed in another, pulling at his ragged beard. "It would let us out o' a bad place mighty easy. Ef Ivan hev, though, I'll bet good dollars he's lost some o' his men a-doin' of it. I'm glad 'at the boss didn't ax me to go after the chap to-night. I'd hev to, I s'pose, 'cordin' to our rules, but I'd think consider'ble o' sayin' good-by to ye all an' makin' my will afore I done it."

"Well, as fer me, ef he hed I'd 'a' kicked. It was understood that none o' us war to seprate. I'd 'a' tol' Carlton thet, an' stood up fer it, blest ef I wouldn't! O' course, ef he goes thet's diff'runt. The capt'in won't think nothin' o' that, fer he's next in command. Though it do seem to me thet he's been shoved up over the shoulders o' good men entirely too rapid. I've been in the band nighabout a year, an' he hev'n't been in it more'n a month, ef thet."

"That's all on account o' Hazel!" his comrade responded. "She's tuck a turrible notion to Carlton, some way. Gals is cur'us critters, an' not fit to hev' in a league o' this kind. I've alus said so. They ain't no dependin' on 'em. But, Black Ivan thinks 'et she's sharper'n a cactus spine, an' when she tuck a fancy to this feller, he up an' makes him lieutenant over all o' us. Not thet he ain't a good man! But, he hev'n't been in the League long enough."

"Jes' so!" the other assented. "He hev'n't. How do we know 'et we kin trust 'im? But, ez fer thet, how do we know we kin trust any one? Duval belonged to the League longer'n either you er me, an' yit he peached. I'll put a ball through him fer it, too, ef I ever git a chance!"

This growling comment was cut short by Carlton's return from his trip of inspection.

The day dragged slowly away. Evening drew near. The outlaws, worn with continuous watching, were growing careless. Suddenly, around a bend in the trail, appeared a man on horseback. He was riding quietly along, alert and watchful, but apparently without any suspicion of peril.

"It's the Tom-cat!" was the quick announcement.

Any one who had ever seen the eccentric cowboy would never err in recognizing him. That ungainly, but muscular figure, and the worn, catskin cap, with the head mounted, and the curving, plume-like tail, once seen could never be forgotten.

The outlaws were immediately plunged into an agitation, that was not unmixed with fear. Carlton seemed scarcely less excited than the rest. He who had talked so coolly of bearding the Tom-cat in his lair became as nervous, apparently, as the most timid.

The Tom-cat was already within gun-shot. Seeing this, Carlton snatched up a Winchester.

"Give it to him, boys! Don't let him get away!"

With this command, he threw the Winchester to his face and, taking hasty aim, fired. The ball cut the dust of a hill just behind the horseman. In his hurry and excitement he had fired too high.

Instantly the Tom-cat wheeled his horse and spurred him around the bend before the other outlaws could bring their pieces to bear.

Carlton stormed furiously at his lack of success, and ordered an instant pursuit, forgetful of the fact that their ponies were not at hand.

"Curse the luck!" he cried. "Why were you fellows so slow? If you had been a little quicker he couldn't have got away. He was closer than I thought, and I overshot him!"

But his fuming did not mend matters. The cowboy detective had escaped, notwithstanding their eagerness for his destruction and their cunningly-devised plans.

"It would be certain death to go after him, in the town, to-night!" he declared, when his rage had somewhat abated. "I won't risk it, and I don't care to ask you to do something I'm afraid to do myself. And there's no use of our remaining here any longer. He will not venture out again soon, by this trail. Neither will he be likely to go out by the one Captain Ivan is watching. He is entirely too shrewd for that."

"We might as well make a break for the other trail and report our failure!" he declared. "This unfortunate business makes some other plans necessary. We can never lead Tom-cat into another trap like this."

Having come to this decision he led his men to the gorge where they had left their horses. Here they prepared and ate supper, and, feeling in a somewhat better humor now that their stomachs were filled, all set off through the darkness for the point where Black Ivan had said he would station his force.

#### CHAPTER III. TWO WOMEN.

Two or three hours of brisk traveling brought them to Black Ivan's point of ambuscade. Ivan himself was not there, and the man left in charge of the party stated that he had gone into Silver City in disguise, accompanied by two of his followers, in the hope of striking the Tom-cat in his own home.

"I trust he will succeed!" Carlton asserted, with considerable bitterness. As he said it, however, his eyes flamed in a curious, doubtful way. Evidently he did not think the Tom-cat would be easily taken.

Just before midnight the sentinel, who had been sent out along the trail, fell back upon the camp with the information that horsemen were approaching. As he did so, the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard.

In a few minutes the well-known hail of Captain Ivan came through the night, and the outlaw chief rode into their midst. He had gone away with two companions. Now he returned with three. And one of them was a woman, bound and helpless, as they could see, even in the faint starlight.

"Got a bird for our cage!" exclaimed Ivan, with a harsh laugh, waving his hand toward the captive.

"Who is it?" questioned Carlton, a suspicion of the truth flashing upon him.

"It's Tom-cat's wife, Mrs. Tom-cat, I suppose you'd call her! Plagued if I know the fellow's real name."

Carlton advanced toward the woman.

"You haven't gagged her, Ivan?"

"No! It's not necessary. We clapped a blanket over her head while in the town. After that she refused to talk."

"What's the use?" asked the woman, bitterly. "It wouldn't do any good. I would like to know, though, why you have put yourselves to so much trouble and where you are taking me?"

"I shouldn't think you'd need to ask!" growled Ivan, at the same time ordering his men to get in readiness for departure. "That precious husband of yours has been pretty rough on us, lately, and we mean to get even. We're tired of watching the trails. He won't venture out of the town of his own accord, and we mean to draw him out. I didn't know how to accomplish that better than by capturing you. He will follow you, and in doing so will be mighty apt to run against a bullet."

This supposed wit was greeted with a coarse guffaw from Ivan's renegades; and, like an echo, came a groan from the lips of the helpless woman. However, that was the only indication of the deep distress that tortured her.

Carlton now gave Captain Ivan a hasty account of the adventures of his own party. As he did not withdraw from the woman's vicinity, to do this, she listened with an eagerness difficult to describe. But she concealed the joy that came to her on learning that her husband had escaped the rifles of his foes.

Ivan punctuated the narrative with ejaculations of displeasure. It almost seemed that the Tom-cat bore a charmed life.

"You allowed yourself to get rattled!" he snarled. "I hardly thought it of *you*, Carlton, for you generally have a cool head. However, what is passed is passed! I think I have hit upon a plan that's bound to succeed. I intend to string ambushes all the way from Silver City to Devil's Mountain."

He said this with a savage cruelty that cared not for the bleeding heart of the cowboy's wife.

The reunited forces were now ready, and the retreat was immediately commenced. The captive, by earnest entreaties and promises of implicit obedience, secured a release from her bonds; but she was closely guarded, showing that the outlaw chief did not rely implicitly upon her promise.

A couple of keen-eyed marksmen were left at that point, and all along the trail at convenient distances, sharpshooters were placed in ambush.

The trail itself was broad and plain. This was in accordance with Ivan's plans. He be-

lieved that the Tom-cat, hot with wrath, would begin a furious pursuit at daybreak. The ease with which the trail could be followed would naturally cause him to quicken his speed. Hence he would more readily fall a victim to the rifles of the men in ambush. It seemed scarcely possible that he could evade them all.

The captive beheld these ominous preparations with a sinking heart. Her husband's recklessness was a quality well known to her. In fact, it quite exceeded his courage. If rage were added to these qualities she was much afraid that discretion would be thrown to the winds. For herself she had little to fear, now that she knew the purposes of the outlaw chief.

The trail led almost directly toward Devil's Mountain, with a few zig-zags here and there, caused by the broken nature of the ground.

As the night advanced the brigands dropped gradually into silence. They were fatigued by their rapid traveling, and the horses were beginning to lag and droop. The poor beasts were spurred mercilessly on, however, until the day began to break faintly in the East. Then a halt was called, the horses were lariatied and a hasty breakfast was served.

When the retreat was resumed Captain Ivan enjoined greater caution. His policy was to conceal the trail as much as possible from that point. It was not at all likely, he argued, that the Tom-cat would ever get that far. He was certain to be killed before traversing half the distance. But it was very probable he would be accompanied by other trailers, and it was now Black Ivan's plan to thoroughly baffle these.

The sharpshooters had been instructed to scatter in all directions after firing, and in no case to approach Devil's Mountain by a direct route. They were to do this whether they succeeded in killing the Tom-cat or not, and as they were all well-mounted, the outlaw chief had no fears that any of them would be taken.

That evening the retreating party halted in a secluded glen, with Devil's Mountain towering just before them. There they remained until darkness settled over the landscape. Ivan pretended that the halt was for the purpose of resting their horses. In reality it was because he did not wish his captive to see the route by which he gained his mountain lair.

When they started again, the party, now greatly diminished in numbers, separated, Ivan accompanying the captive. For hours, as it seemed to her, the brown-faced chief rode silently at her side like some genius of evil. Then the party reunited on the bank of a brawling mountain stream.

Taking her bridle-rein in his hand, Captain Ivan led the horse into the rushing waters, moving against the current, and his men followed unquestioningly.

For more than an hour they kept in the course. Then the noise made by the horses churning the water with their hoofs, was drowned by the roar of a cataract.

"You must prepare for a ducking!" admonished Ivan, addressing the woman. "But there will be no harm come of it, for I will provide you with a slicker that will partly protect you. You will be a bird with wet feathers for a little while, that's all. But you will afterward have hours and days in which to dry them, for I needn't tell you that I don't intend to let you out of my clutches in a hurry. I'll hold you long enough, at least, to see if your friends down yonder place anything like a money value on your liberty."

"When we come to the waterfall—for we must pass through it—I'd advise you to shut your eyes, hold your breath and cling tightly to the saddle. If you do that you will get through all right."

The roar of the falls had now grown louder, and, in a few minutes, it was close at hand. The air was filled with a mist-like spray and the white water could be dimly seen through the gloom.

They did not go directly through the center of the falls for the water in the stream was quite deep where the plunge was heaviest, but veered to one side and passed through where the descending sheet was thinnest.

The captive was a brave woman but her courage fairly forsook her when she felt the first dash of the stream overhead. It fell upon her with a force that threatened to hurl her from the saddle. But, it was all over in a moment. The dreadful roar was behind her and it grew fainter and fainter as they journeyed on.

In a little while she perceived that they had entered a cavern. The twinkling stars had been blotted out of the sky and there was a sense of closeness indicating confined space. Then, at

the turn of an angle, the light of a fire dispelled the gloom.

To her great surprise the figure of a woman appeared from some point near the fire and hurried toward the advancing party. It seemed a strange place for a woman, for the captive knew, instinctively, that the cavern was the home of the outlaws. The suggestion came that perhaps she, too, was a prisoner.

This was soon dissipated, however, for when Black Ivan leaped from his horse, the woman rushed to him and greeted him warmly.

"What success?" she cried, staring curiously at the wife of the Tom-cat. "I see you have a prisoner. But, surely, Ivan, you have made a mistake in the sex."

Black Ivan's daughter had a habit of calling him by his first name;—a very objectionable habit, it is true, but it sounded rather piquant, coming from her lips.

The men were sprawling ungracefully from their horses and the outlaw chief now assisted his prisoner to dismount. At this Hazel Thornpath approached the helpless woman.

"Ivan has whispered to me that you are the wife of the Tom-cat!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand. "I don't like the Tom-cat, but that's no reason why we need be enemies. He is a wicked man but I believe you are a good woman. What shall I call you?"

"Mollie," was the rather feeble reply. She scarcely knew how to take this frank, impetuous creature.

"Of course you didn't come of your own accord. I don't need to ask any questions to learn that. Still, I'm rather glad you're here. And"—bending down and whispering the words—"I do hope, for your sake, that the Tom-cat will not fall into their traps. I wish you would induce him to drop that awful detective business. Outlawry isn't nice, I know, but it's better than that."

She had rattled on without giving Mollie a chance to speak.

"Now, if you'll take off that slicker and come with me, I'll take you where you can get some dry clothes. And, as I said before—or if I didn't say it I thought it—I hope we'll be friends. You can't imagine how lonesome it is here. Nothing but those horrid men to talk to, and most of them are wicked as Satan and ugly as sin."

Thus chattering, she dragged the woman after her into a cave-like apartment that led into the darkness, back of the fire. Here she lighted a coal-oil lamp, and by its rays Mollie saw that the singular room guaranteed them all the privacy of a lady's boudoir; and here we will leave them while we follow, for a time, the fortunes of the Tom-cat.

#### CHAPTER IV. TOM-CAT'S RAGE.

WHEN that shot rung out, the Tom-cat knew what kind of a trap he had tumbled into. It was not the first time that dastardly assassins had sought his life. Jerking his horse around, he bent low in the saddle and spurred swiftly over the backward trail. It was almost night and as soon as he was out of sight and hearing of the ambushing party, he rode into the adjacent scrub, tethered his horse and stole toward the ambush on foot.

He was pretty well convinced that the would-be assassin was a member of Black Ivan's band of road-agents. If the fellow was alone he thought he might be able to capture him and force some valuable confessions from his lips. Owing to the extremely cautious way in which he was compelled to advance, when he arrived at the point of ambuscade, he found it deserted. An examination of the trampled earth, however, showed the probable number of the party and their line of retreat.

The gathering darkness made trailing difficult, but he hurried along, nevertheless, feeling sure they would not anticipate such a movement on his part. But this confidence did not decrease his alertness.

When he came up with the outlaws they had finished their supper and had their horses in readiness for pushing on. He saw that they were, as he had supposed, Black Ivan's men.

"It makes 'em nervous 'cause I got away!" he whispered. "They're afeard I'll come back with a wheel o' fellers an' gobble 'em. Ef thar wasn't p'ticklar bizness requirin' my 'tention I'd foller 'em to the eend o' their trail. That'd take me right into their devil's nest, I calc'late. But I can't do it this trip, no way you kin fix it."

He saw them mount and ride slowly away. Then he hurried back to his horse and continued on toward Silver City. He had some business matters to attend to in the town and when he reached home it was past midnight.

As a protection against enemies, and because he was in the habit of appearing at such unusual hours he had adopted a peculiar knock to apprise his wife of his return. This time, to his astonishment, the knock met with no response. But when he repeated it a faint and muffled groan reached him.

A terrible chill gathered about his heart. Without a moment's hesitation he hurled himself against the door. It flew open, and a stifled groan again froze his blood. He was compelled to strike a match before he could tell what terrible thing had occurred.

The servant girl was lying in a corner of the room, bound and with a handkerchief tied in her mouth. His wife, Molly, was nowhere to be seen.

Before the match flickered out he applied it to a lamp. Then he leaped across the room, removed the choking handkerchief and cut the cords that held the girl helpless.

"What's the meanin' of this?" he asked, tremblingly, as he assisted her to her feet.

The tale the girl told, as soon as she regained the power of speech fairly drove him frantic. Three masked men had broken into the house, without warning, she said, a few hours previous. By means of threatening pistols they had compelled them into silence and submission. She had been bound as the Tom-cat found her, and Molly had been carried away. More than that she did not know.

"It is the work of that devil, Black Ivan!" hissed the Tom-cat, his eyes flaming. "He's done it out o' revenge, maybe, fer the way I've chased him! More likely, though, he hopes to draw me into his clutches, sence I escaped him this evenin'. Thar'll be a big reckonin' atween us, ef we ever meet! And we'll meet, ef I have to trail him to the sea!"

There was a terrible and deadly earnestness in his words that boded ill to the redoubtable chief of the road-agents.

After questioning the girl over and over as to the particulars of the affair, he escorted her to the house of her parents, then began to revolve plans of pursuit.

There was in the town a young married man named Clifford Curtis. Curtis's wife was the owner of the Edgerton Mine, a very valuable property, and they were among the Tom-cat's dearest friends. Disregarding the lateness of the hour, the cowboy detective bent his steps toward the Curtis residence.

His repeated rings brought a sleepy servant to the door. The servant knew him, and the message he gave startled that officious individual quite out of his customary equanimity and politeness. With a white face he retreated to obey the request, leaving the Tom-cat to find his way to the parlor as best he could.

In a remarkably short time, Mr. and Mrs. Curtis made their appearance.

"We never disobey peremptory orders from the Tom-cat," said Curtis, greeting the cowboy warmly. "From your looks I judge that something startling has occurred. What is it?"

Thus questioned, the Tom-cat, scarcely able to control his emotions, poured out his tale of distress.

The Curtises were equally alarmed and indignant.

"And you think it is the work of Black Ivan?" the gentleman questioned.

"I know it," the Tom-cat declared. And then he related how Black Ivan's men had waylaid him that very evening on the main trail from Silver City, and how he had followed and recognized them.

"I've been doin' some thinkin'," he declared, "and I am sart'in that Black Ivan wants to draw me into another trap. He knows, o' course, that I'll follow. Any man would that keered for his wife."

"What do you propose doing?" Mrs. Curtis questioned, with anxiety. "It seems to me you will surely be slain if you pursue them. And yet, poor Molly must be rescued. I could never rest if anything serious should happen to her."

The Tom-cat knew how well Mrs. Curtis loved and appreciated his wife, and her sympathetic words went straight to his manly heart.

"Yes, we must git her back!" he declared; "and I'm the only man that kin do it."

"I can raise a regiment of men in the mornin', if it is necessary," asserted Curtis. "The road-agents can be followed with such a force that they will be compelled to scatter or leave the country. If they give fight we can annihilate them."

"Twon't do," averred the Tom-cat, fumbling nervously at his catskin cap. "They'd draw

us into a trap an' kill half o' our men before we could rout 'em. And then, thar's Molly! In the scrimmage some o' the bullets might s'arch her out."

"I don't believe they would give fight," declared Curtis. "Not if we had a strong body of men at our heels."

"Ef they didn't they'd take to their holes like hill-foxes. They've got a hidin'-place, er maybe a half-dozen o' 'em, som'eres on Devil's Mountain. I've hunted fer it time an' ag'in, but couldn't never hit it."

"My idee is that I'd better go it single-handed. What I come hyer fer was to ax you to gether twenty or thirty good fighters in the mornin', and send them into the canyon below Painted Rock. Have 'em go afoot, one at a time, so as not to 'tract any attention, an' take enough grub to last 'em two or three weeks. Give 'em orders that they're to stay thar until I come or send some one fer 'em."

"And in the mean time, isn't there something that we can do here?" questioned Mrs. Curtis. "You can imagine how terribly anxious we shall be if we are forced to remain here idle during your absence."

"Yes," replied the Tom-cat, thoughtfully. "Though I don't see what you kin do. P'raps we ought to make some arrangement by which you c'd send a force after Molly, in case I go under. It ain't no use sayin' I ain't tacklin' a dangerous trail in follerin' them. I am, an' nobody knows it better'n you do. It'll be like walkin' into the jaws of death. So, I allow, we might's well figger on what is more'n likely to happen. Ef I'm killed, send out the best trailers in the country, an' never let up until you have Molly ag'in, safe an' sound."

"Ef at the end o' a week I don't report to the men in the canyon, and send you a message, you'll know what's happened an' kin take steps accordin'."

Curtis assured him that his requests should be faithfully complied with.

"There's one more p'int," added the Tom-cat, as he arose to go. "Keep this hull thing jist as shady as you kin. I don't want the people of Silver City to know anything about it ef it kin be helped. Ivan's got spies among us, an' I don't want our plans carried to him. Thar'll have to be some explanations made. But you'll know how to manage that 'thout me tellin' you."

Then, after receiving many prayerful and tearful admonitions, the brave Tom-cat strode out into the darkness and began preparations for the perilous work before them.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### TOM-CAT AS A TRAILER.

THE Tom-cat's first step was to return home, obtain a goodly quantity of cartridges and a sufficient store of eatables to last several days. A hasty examination of the house and premises showed that the only article missing was Molly's saddle.

"I'm glad they had sense enough to think o' that!" he muttered. "An' I wouldn't 'a' keered ef they'd 'a' took her pony along of it, fer it's an easy ridin' nag."

Daybreak was now beginning to color the eastern sky, and he set out for the point where he had left the outlaws the evening before. The sun was well up when he reached it. The trail, broad and plain, led away toward the south.

He got down on his hands and knees and examined the hoof-prints with microscopic care. When watching the outlaws at their camp-fire he had counted their horses. He was now anxious to see if their number had been added to. His skill as a trailer enabled him to accomplish this difficult feat. The trampled grass was as legible to him as a printed page. Each hoof-print was like a distinct character; and when he had finished his scrutiny he knew that no other horses had joined the group.

"They've headed fer the other trail out o' Silver City and Black Ivan's jined 'em thar. Then they've gone straight away for Devil's Mountain. I know what the feller's up to. He intends to down me like a roped steer. An' this is his plan to git me within reach o' his lariat. He thinks, o' course, that I'll come thrashin' along like a steam-engine. I mout ef thar wasn't too much at stake. But with Molly in his clutches—"

His features worked convulsively and he writhed forward through the scrub.

This intuitive knowledge of Black Ivan's intentions made him doubly cautious. He was convinced that the trail was ambushed. Therefore his quick ear caught every sound, and his trained and watchful eyes noted every fleeting shadow.

The trail he was following and the one Captain Ivan traversed out of Silver City, formed a right angle. Being satisfied that the outlaw leader had headed straight for Devil's Mountain, the Tom-cat diverged from the route and set out across the unbroken country. In doing this he avoided the deadly ambushade at the junction of the trails, although, of course, he had no knowledge of the fact that sharp-shooters were located there.

As he hurried onward his brain was a hot caldron of seething emotions. Prudence dictated wariness and circumspection, and a minute investigation of the way that would render progress insufferably tedious. His intense anxiety concerning the fate of Molly, his beloved wife, kept urging him to race-horse speed. Between the two his spirit was torturingly chafed. In addition to these impulses there were deep thoughts of anger and revenge. He burned to strike Black Ivan and his renegades with the hand of destruction.

It was past noon when he reached the Silver City trail. Being a worn and dusty route he could not trace the hoof-prints of Ivan's horses, but he was satisfied they had passed that way. A few miles beyond, the trail shifted its course and he judged that the outlaws would leave it at that place and continue on toward their mountain fastness.

Relying on this belief, and anxious to avoid the ambushes that he knew would be strung along the route, he made a wide detour, intending to regain Black Ivan's trail after it had left the beaten one. This he accomplished successfully, and in doing so safely evaded the second ambush.

On again striking the trail of the outlaws he was considerably astonished and somewhat mystified. The hoof-marks showed that the number of horses was double that of the party which had waylaid him.

"The hull b'ilin' of 'em has been hangin' round Silver City," he growled, in anger and disgust. "Cowards air like wolves. They're afeard o' the sunlight, an' allus hunt in packs. The idee o' a regiment o' men gittin' down to sich p'izen meanness. P'raps, ef they'd 'a' had two or three dozen more they might even have tried to capter me!"

Settling upon the point for which he believed they were aiming, he made another detour, and these tactics he continued throughout the afternoon.

Once or twice, without his knowledge, he came dangerously near the concealed sharp-shooters. His proverbial good luck clung to him, however, and he was not detected.

Just before sunset, as he was toiling onward, with every sense at the keenest tension, his eagle-like eyes caught the glint of the declining sun as it glanced on a gun-barrel.

He sunk to the ground noiselessly, and wriggled away from the dangerous location.

On recovering from the start which the sight had given him, he began to consider some means by which he could approach the ambushade, for such he knew it to be.

The bright point that had attracted his attention came from a little clump of trees on an ascending slope a half-mile away. He could not be at all sure that he had escaped notice. However, as he had kept well concealed, he was almost convinced that his presence was still unknown to the watching outlaws.

"Come mighty near tumblin' onto the rattlesnakes," he muttered, a faint smile lighting up his anxious face. "I knowed they was along here some'eres, an' ef I hadn't kep' my peepers wide open I'd 'a' felt their bite in a mighty few minutes more."

His curiosity and a desire for information induced him to undertake the difficult feat of approaching them. The coming of night seemed to render the undertaking entirely feasible.

By crawling two or three hundred yards further the granite slope was interposed between himself and the concealed marksmen. Then by slow and wearisome hitches he crawled up the long ascent.

When he reached the summit of the hill above and to the rear of the outlaws, the sun had set and the shadows of night were rapidly gathering. From this coign of vantage he could look down into the little grove where, although he could see nothing of them, he knew the men were concealed.

"Gun-bar'ls don't go walkin' round of themselves," he commented, as he stared at the scrubby trees. "An' ef that wasn't a gun-bar'l I seen ye kin call me a tenderfoot. I've seen the sun shinin' on rocks afore to-day, an' I never yit was deceived into thinkin' it was

glancin' ag'in' metal. An' ef metal, what else c'u'd it be 'cept some kind of a weepin'?"

As he was almost exhausted by the fatigues of the day and night and the anxiety he felt, he was not at all averse to lying there for a time, thus recruiting his strength while he watched the camp below. He also drew largely on his supply of eatables, which he had scarcely touched since setting out.

When the shadows grew heavy on the slope of the hill he writhed toward the grove in a crouching, cat-like way. The long silence below had assured him that the lurking assassins were wholly unaware of his proximity.

It took him a good half-hour to gain the edge of the grove. When he did so, he was rewarded by seeing the shadowy figures of two men reclining in careless attitudes behind a bowlder.

They were talking in low tones, and this whetted his desire for information.

Again he had recourse to his prostrate, snake-like motion, and was soon near enough to hear distinctly. Lying thus within a few feet of the men he could easily have slain them both. But the Tom-cat, like most brave men, was not a lover of bloodshed, and a prowling assassin was to him an object of abhorrence.

The talk of the rascals was simply a series of growling comments.

"I tell you what, Jim, I'm gittin' pesky tired of this air! I don't see any use o' havin' men strung clear from Jerusalem to Jericho jest to snake in one feller. We're a-wastin' our time here. Ef the Tom-cat ever started out the boys hes gobbled him long ago."

"Right ye air!" responded his companion, twisting his long limbs into an easier position. "These trees don't cast a might o' a shadder when the sun's bot, and I'm blistered from my neck to my heels. A man ort to be built like a lizard to lay out on the rocks and fry like we've been a-doin'. Act'illy, it's been hot enough to-day to roast eggs!"

"Sarves ye right!" grunted the Tom-cat, lifting his head and peering at the men sharply. "I wish't the heat had 'a' struck to your in'ards and killed ye!"

"Yas!" continued the first speaker, "hot ain't no name fer it! Still, I s'pose we'll hev to stay here till the boss sends us word to quit. And," with a groan, "likely that won't be for a week!"

For an hour or more the Tom-cat lay there, drinking in every word. He learned little, however, that could be of any value to him. But it served to reassure him that he was on the right track. Several times the scoundrels spoke of a "woman critter that the boss is kerryin' away," and he knew that the reference was to Molly.

He also learned, what he was already convinced of, that Ivan's rendezvous was somewhere on Devil's Mountain, that there were other ambushades that he must be careful to avoid.

When he had listened until wearied, he crept back over the crest of the ridge, and sought out a secure retreat where he might sleep and recuperate for the toils and dangers of the coming day.

#### CHAPTER VI.

##### A JEALOUS WOMAN.

THE cavern home of the outlaws was, in many respects, a wonder of nature's handiwork. It consisted of a series of large chambers, reaching for a long distance back of the waterfall, and with smaller chambers and passages leading from these.

In its center and extending throughout its entire length, was a rift-like chasm. Strange gurglings, hissings and groans came out of its black depths and an attenuated mist hung always above it. An underground torrent roared and frothed at the bottom of the chasm, and by lying on one's face a gleam of the waters could be sometimes seen.

The average member of Ivan's band had a wholesome dread of this stygian abyss. As the cone above them was known as Devil's Mountain, they had named this the "Devil's Tea-kettle." Where the torrent emerged, or if it emerged at all, was unknown to them. The probabilities are, however, that it united at some point, with the mountain stream, by which they reached the cavern.

The Devil's Tea-kettle had yawned for more than one of the road-agent band. Into its depths many shrieking traitors had been hurled, and the threat of such a fate would sufficiently cow the most refractory.

Hazel Thornpath was perhaps the only being acquainted with all the mysterious secrets of this cavern. She had frequently been left there for days and weeks with few or no companions,

and her loneliness had driven her into extended and perilous explorations.

Ivan's men did not make this their constant place of abode. They only resorted to it, as a rule, when hard pressed and anxious to baffle their pursuers. And in that it had never yet failed them. The shining waterfall was, to the outer world, an impenetrable curtain. Usually, the outlaws lay out on the mountain slopes, preferring the starry canopy of the sky, to the drenching necessary to regain this retreat.

As has been hinted, Hazel Thornpath was desperately in love with the handsome lieutenant, Tim Carlton. On the morning after their arrival at the cavern, this love was changed into furious jealousy.

Carlton had never given her cause to look on him as a lover. But there was a brilliancy and dash about him that, nevertheless, commanded her unbounded admiration.

The exciting cause of jealousy was that she had seen Carlton conversing with Molly Tenterden, the wife of the Tom-cat. Molly had been allowed the liberty of the cavern, and in strolling about had encountered Carlton. A few words had passed between them, in consequence, exciting Hazel's passionate ire.

However, as Carlton came toward her, she sheathed her claws, and by a supreme effort of the will, controlled her hot passion.

"Making love to another man's wife, eh?" she asked, with a bewitching demureness, that gave no hint of her real feelings. "Upon my word, Lieutenant Carlton, I didn't think it of you!"

Carlton stared, then broke into a light laugh. "What an idea!"

"Oh, I have eyes!" she declared. "I'm not a mole if I do burrow beneath a mountain. Now tell me what you said to her. Every word!"

Carlton laughed again.

"Why, I told her it was a pleasant morning, or rather that I supposed it was, and that I hoped she had passed a restful night."

"And was that all?" her eyes shining like twin interrogation points.

"Yes, I believe so. I may have said a few other things, but they were of no consequence, and I don't remember them."

"Now, Lieutenant Carlton, you are fibbing to me!" shaking a brown forefinger at him. "I know that you said a good deal more than that. I was watching you, and you talked to her quite a while. Altogether too long for the conversational nothings you have reported."

Carlton was evidently astounded, and flushed painfully.

This flush was, to the jealous woman, the strongest possible confirmation of her suspicions.

"Do you want me to tell you what you said to her?" she asked, quickly following up her supposed advantage. "As far as words went it wasn't much, but it meant volumes. Molly is a handsome woman!"

"Not unhandsome," Carlton confessed, with a puzzled look.

"I said handsome, Lieutenant Carlton. And what does a man mean when he seeks a secluded place, and talks airy nothings to a handsome woman?"

"Why, what are you driving at?" he questioned, searching her face closely.

"Just this!" she declared, her temper breaking bounds. "You have taken a violent fancy to the wife of the Tom-cat. Perhaps you didn't tell her so. A man is careful on such points, at first. But, just the same, you have fallen in love with her."

Her eyes flamed, and she clinched her shapely hands as she made the declaration.

Carlton regarded her with a look of wordless surprise.

"I—I can't understand what has brought such an idea into your head!" he at length faltered. "I assure you, Hazel, you are entirely mistaken! I never thought of such a thing. Why should I care to win the love of a married woman, when there are so many single ones?"

"It is not usual for road-agents to hold marriage as a very sacred institution," she sneered.

"Probably not. But sacred or otherwise, I never entertained such thoughts as you attribute to me! I am not a marrying man; but if I was, I would never think of the Tom-cat's wife in that connection."

Carlton would have lacked ordinary powers of discernment, if he had failed to see the motive underlying Hazel's assault.

"Let me explain to you, how I came to speak to her at all," he continued, determined to brush away every vestige of that ugly suspicion.

"Can you?" she interrupted, shaking her black mane.

A look of involuntary admiration came into Carlton's eyes. Hazel Thornpath was superbly brilliant as she stood thus before him, with cheeks aflame and eyes shining. Her passionate tremulousness gave to her a vibrant beauty like that of a blushing, breeze-kissed rose.

"I think I can," he said, striving to conceal his admiration. "Our meeting was purely accidental. You know that, although I have belonged to the band several weeks, this is my first visit to the cavern. Circumstances have kept me away from here and out on the hills, ever since I joined your father's band. Hence, I had a natural curiosity to peep into some of its mysteries. In doing so, my trail led across that of the captive.

"As second in command, I naturally feel some interest in the woman. Would you think it anything strange, Hazel, to have seen your father talking to her this morning, as you saw me? I'm certain you wouldn't! Because we are holding her here is no reason why we should treat her rudely or refuse to speak to her. In fact, as we expect her to bring us in a snug ransom, by and by, we are under obligations to use her well."

Hazel hardly knew how to reply to the argument, but she was not in the least convinced by it. She was satisfied that Carlton was dealing falsely with her, and her fierce jealousy throttled discretion.

"I ought to believe what you say, Lieutenant Carlton. Perhaps I do! You think me a silly fool; and I am. I've not been reared like other women. I've been allowed to go wild; and as a consequence I feel, sometimes, like a tigress. You can see for yourself that I'm not in the best of humors, now.

"In the first place, though, I want you to understand that I don't care a wrapping of my finger for you. But you have given me, time and again, since you came among us, occasion to think that you care for me! That was why I flared up. I don't allow any man to play double, where I am concerned."

Carlton was flushing and twisting uneasily. He seemed on the point of interrupting her, but her quivering forefinger forbade it.

Hazel drew herself to her full height and a look of cruel vindictiveness flamed across her face.

"I know I oughtn't to make threats, Lieutenant Carlton, but a word of warning may not be entirely amiss. My eyes are sharp and my ears keen. Please remember the fact; and if, some dark night, that woman slips into the Devil's Tea-kettle, you can guess the cause of it."

With a hysterical laugh she leaped backward and disappeared before he could form a reply or stretch out a hand to restrain her.

#### CHAPTER VII. BEAUTY IN TEARS.

THE threat startled Carlton and his first impulse was to rush after the angry beauty. Then he realized how useless such a course would be. One might as well attempt to reason with a whirlwind. Her declaration that he had, by words and acts, implied a growing love for her, had astonished and annoyed him.

Black Ivan was a man who would not tolerate a slight put upon his daughter. Should she accuse him of double dealing, to her father, trouble would necessarily result.

Carefully he recalled every scrap of conversation with Hazel, which could have led her to think him an admirer. He had been kind to her,—even attentive. But his kindness was the kindness of friendship, and not of love.

"One has to approach such a creature as he would a thorny rose!" he muttered. "I thought to deepen my hold on Black Ivan by humoring the whims and flattering the pride of his daughter; and I find I have made a mess of it. Woman jumps at conclusions and always guesses too much or not enough. Hazel's jealousy of Molly is whimsically absurd. But it would be impossible to convince her of that."

There were other thoughts that annoyed Carlton, chief among which was the fear that she might put her threat against Molly into execution. He could only hope that her better judgment would return when her rage abated; and he resolved to keep a sharp watch against treachery, in the mean time.

When Hazel left Carlton she went directly to the little chamber where she knew she would find Molly.

Molly, who had been crying softly, was somewhat surprised and not a little alarmed at Hazel's menacing manner.

The contrast between the women was most

marked. Hazel, radiant and beautiful, even in anger, with her glowing brown skin and sparkling eyes. Molly, fair, blue-eyed and plump, courageous when aroused, but at other times retiring and modest.

Hazel had erred in stating that Molly Tenderden was handsome. She was fairly good looking but would not attract much attention amid a bevy of beauties.

When she saw that the captive had been crying, Hazel's anger cooled, somewhat. She was not heartless, as a rule. Sometimes, though, when her Romany blood boiled with rage, she felt like a fiend incarnate.

"That scamp, Carlton, has been insulting you, I see," she purred, smoothing back her tangled hair and looking down at Molly. "I suspected as much when I saw him speaking to you awhile ago. If you will tell me what he said, dear, it may be that I can help you."

The words brought a look of astonishment into Molly's tear-wet eyes.

"Out there, a half-hour ago!" Hazel explained. "He was making love to you, was he not? I accused him of it. He denied it, of course. But most men are born liars, and I didn't believe a word he said."

Molly stared at the young woman as if she thought her suddenly bereft of her senses.

"Come, dear, tell me what he said?" Hazel urged, running her little brown hand over Molly's hair.

"The gentleman who met me in the outer chamber?" Molly stammered, confused, apparently, by Hazel's suspicions. "He didn't say anything to me such as you seem to think. He wasn't at all insulting. He was only kind to me and asked me a few common questions; that's all."

To any reasonable mind the statement ought to have brought conviction. But, just then, Hazel Thornpath was not in a reasoning mood. She imagined that she detected a guilty undercurrent in Molly's tones. There was certainly a tremor in Molly's voice, but it was the tremor of grief. The fatigues she had undergone and the perils she believed her husband to be in had quite unnerved her.

"You are deceiving me, just as Carlton did!" cried Hazel, her purring changing to a threatening hiss.

"Indeed I'm not!" Molly asserted, firmly, beginning to comprehend the drift of Hazel's questioning. "For all I know, Lieutenant Carlton is a perfectly honorable man, though I must say he's in a mighty bad business. I can't see what has put such notions into your head. It must be jealousy, for I can see that you're in love with the man, yourself."

"Yes, I am!" Hazel declared, fiercely, deliberately unmasking. "And it makes me wild whenever I think he doesn't love me. I swear to you that, rather than have him fall in love with another woman, I would kill him with my own hand."

"You're acting foolish, my dear," said Molly, her sympathies aroused. "You can't get a man's love by throwing yourself at his head. If Carlton takes a notion to you, he'll let you know it quick enough. Such things always go backward when you try to hurry 'em."

Hazel had dropped down at her side and Molly pressed her soft, white hand against the girl's throbbing forehead.

The touch quieted temporarily the fierce tumult that raged in her breast.

"Oh, I do so love him!" she moaned, "and he cares nothing for me. Nothing!"

Molly seemed at a loss for words of comfort.

"Oh, if I could only win his love! If I could win his love!"

"You mustn't carry on so, dear! It only makes you miserable and it don't do any good. I would like to say something to help you, but I can't. If you know he don't love you, you will have to fight this feeling down. It's the best thing you can do and it's what I advise."

Hazel sprung to her feet, a hot flush scorching away the tear.

"Why should you advise me thus unless you are deceiving me?" she cried, and sunk upon a stool, quivering and breathless, and gave way to a flood of tears.

Molly was pained at this exhibition and at the doubt cast upon her veracity. She sought by every artifice to quiet the weeping beauty, and remove her foolish suspicion. It was all in vain. Hazel refused to be comforted or convinced; and at last hurried blindly from the apartment, furious with vindictive jealousy.

#### CHAPTER VIII. INTO THE LION'S DEN.

DESPITE the intense anxiety he felt concerning the fate of his wife, Tom-cat slept long and

well. When he awoke, the sun was rising. Fearing to build a fire, he ate his breakfast cold; and then began another of his tedious detours.

By keeping this up throughout the day he managed to pass the various ambushes, and that afternoon reached the point where Black Ivan's men had separated.

"Scattered!" he exclaimed, as he surveyed the diverging hoof-prints. "That's an old Indian trick, but it don't fool me wu'th a cent. They'll come together ag'in, by an' by. The trouble is, I may lose the trail among the rocks; fer, o' course, they'll try to hide it, now."

He was convinced that the perils of ambuscade were past, or nearly so. It would be manifestly impossible to guard all the trails which radiated from that point. And they would have to guard all or none, for they could not tell which he would follow.

The Cowboy Detective scarcely realized what a wonderful feat of trailing he had already accomplished. Not one trailer in a hundred could have avoided that deadly line of sharpshooters.

After racing around for a time in a series of everwidening circles, he commenced to follow one of the plainest of the trails. It was that of a horse with a broken hoof. He feared the outlaws might have crossed and recrossed their lines of flight many times; and by following these curiously-marked hoof-prints he would avoid confusion.

He saw the double trail made by the horses of the brigands and Molly. But there was more than one double trail, and he could not be certain of the right one. And along them might lie deadly perils.

In this frame of mind he set out again, watchful as an Indian and tireless as an automaton.

The evening found him yet a considerable distance from Devil's Mountain. But, although he did not know it, he was very near to the place where the trails re-united.

As night came down, it occurred to him that he ought to visit the rendezvous at Painted Rock during the hours of darkness. The men sent out from Silver City were there, now. The time already occupied by him on the trail rendered it questionable if he could pay them a visit within a week, if he did not go that night.

Notwithstanding his firm resolve to go, he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion immediately after his cold supper. He did not awake until morning, and then all thought of the visit was abandoned.

About noon, he reached the point on the river bank where Ivan's men had come together. The fact of their taking to the water did not baffle him much. It was certainly impossible that they could keep always in the bed of the stream.

He was satisfied they had advanced against the current; and so, stole along toward the mountain slopes, concealing his movements by bush and rock, and eagerly watching the shores.

It was past mid-afternoon when he reached the vicinity of the waterfall. He was about to advance to the foot of the cascade feeling that the outlaws must surely have left the stream at that point, when his attention was drawn to a man on the opposite ridge. The man was lying prostrate on the rocks, gazing with questioning eyes down the narrow, bush grown valley.

"Hookey!" exclaimed the Tom-cat, with an evident start. "In other minnit that feller would a-clapped his peepers on me. P'raps he's lookin' fer a chap about my size. Wonder who he kin be?"

Suddenly a flash of light came from the spot where the man lay. It was followed by another, then by a series.

"Telegraphin'!" the Tom-cat declared, an inquisitive light coming into his anxious face. "That's wu'th lookin' into. I don't low I kin read his signs, but ef I git clost enough nebbe he'll read 'em fer me."

How to accomplish this was the question. The stream interposed and it seemed unwise to attempt to cross it in broad daylight. However, after searching the shores carefully, he noticed that at one point the somber rock and fringing trees cast the current almost into shadow.

Toward this point he cautiously made his way, and by dint of a little wading got safely across the stream.

"Don't like that air, at all!" he grumbled, looking down at his dripping trowsers. "That'll make a trail over the rocks wuss'n any mus'-rat's."

He halted, removed his shoes and wrung the water from his clothing. Then, replacing the wet articles, he began to work his way slowly, toward the spot whence had come the flashes of light. As he drew near the place he discovered

that the man had a comrade. This made the Tom cat extremely wary. There might be others crouching on the mountain slopes from whose gaze no watchful care could hide him.

He approached the men from the rear, and when within a rod, flattened himself like a lizard, in the shadow of a big boulder. By peering through the bushy fringe that interposed he could see the men plainly. They were Captain Ivan and Lieutenant Carlton. He was well acquainted with the appearance of the outlaw chief, but had seen Carlton only once.

Ivan held a tiny mirror in his hand and was moving it so that at varying intervals it reflected the sunlight in a series of long and short flashes.

Far back over the trail, miles away as it seemed to the Tom-cat, similar flashes, like tiny points of light, could also be seen. The flashes of lights represented letters and words, somewhat as they are represented by the Morse alphabet; and by means of them Ivan was communicating with the men at the last ambush-cade. At the same time he was keeping up a running fire of talk for the benefit of Carlton, who did not seem to be familiar with the code of signals.

"I can't understand the thing at all!" he was saying. "There is surely some mystery back of it. It appears that, so far, no pursuit has been organized or attempted. That isn't like the Tom-cat. I expected to have him racing this way within an hour after we carried away his wife."

"Then, none of the men have seen him?" Carlton questioned, anxiously. "That's strange!"

"Strangest thing I ever heard of," Black Ivan asserted. "It can't be that the boys have let him slip by them!"

"Surely not! And yet it's wonderfully queer."

"They say they have had reports from all the men," continued the chief, who had been intently watching the far-away flashes while he talked. "They are becoming discouraged, and want to know what to do. What is your advice, Carlton?"

"Tell them to stay there, by all means," was the emphatic rejoinder. "There may be some deep plot back of this curious silence."

Then Ivan recommenced his signaling, and for several minutes was too busy to talk.

"They'll grumble at the order," he said, rising, when he had finished, and thrusting the mirror into his pocket. "But, like you, I think they had better remain there a while longer."

The singular inactivity of the Tom-cat evidently annoyed him.

Carlton also got upon his feet, and, the two sauntered slowly away toward the waterfall, passing within arm's-length of the hiding-place of the Tom-cat.

"Their den's somewhar around hyer," the latter whispered, excitedly. "I'll jest shadder 'em so long as I can see. In doin' it, though, I reckon I'll have to be as sly as a weasel slippin' onto a prairie-hen. This is about the best chance I'll ever have."

By this time the men were some distance away. But as the slope in that direction was not very well covered, the Tom-cat still feared to leave his hiding-place.

They walked straight on toward the falls, entered the stream and passed through the descending sheet of water.

The watching cowboy gave a low whistle of astonishment.

"Gr-eat Jehosaphat! That jes' knocks the persimmons. I wouldn't 'a' believed it ef I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. Go ker-plunk through a waterfall same's ef it was a corral gate!"

The Tom-cat stared at the singing cascade as if mesmerized.

"Must be a hole back thar!" he at length soliloquized. "It's mighty lucky I seen 'em. I wouldn't never thought o' lookin' fer it in that place. That shows why I couldn't never discover anything ov this mountain. I've trailed 'em in this direction a dozen times an' always lost 'em jest when I'd begin to feel hopeful."

Knowing that the home of the outlaws was so near at hand he feared to stir, until the coming of darkness. But, when the shadows grew thick he advanced, boldly, toward the falls.

His anxiety was now at fever-heat. He believed that Molly was hidden away behind that cascade, and the belief excited him to the verge of recklessness.

"I suppose I ought to go back an' bring up the men before I go in thar, but I can't! I jes' can't! Mebbe Molly's a-needin' help this minnit. Who knows? They're a p'izen lot. I hope

to have the pleasure some day o' twistin' the neck o' that air Black Ivan."

Before venturing into the stream, he removed his coat and carefully wrapped his revolvers and cartridges in it. Then he entered the water, feeling his way carefully, inch by inch. He was soon soaked by the spray; and the roar was so deafening that he was sure the splashing of his footfalls would not be heard.

He knew not what dangers he was advancing upon. There might be deadly vortices on every hand. But he pressed on, courageous, self-reliant, and with that uplifting of the spirit that heroes feel in time of danger.

When the full force of the falls struck him, the shock was so startling and tremendous that he was well-nigh overthrown. But he regained his footing and, gasping and struggling, dashed forward.

In a moment, as it seemed, the roar was behind him and he was clawing the water out of his face and eyes. The gloom was intense. Outside the faint radiance of the stars gave some light. Here the darkness could almost be felt.

"Phew!" he sputtered, as he attempted to squeeze the water from his dripping clothes. "That 'ud make a tip-top shower-bath. When I git rich I'll buy this here Devil's Mountain and start a bathin' establishment er a laundry!" He endeavored to smile as he pulled on his wet coat and readjusted his weapons.

"Now the question is, where am I? I ort to be safe enough, anyway, ef I don't pitch into a hole. Nobody can't see me fer the darkness an' nobody can't hear me fer the cat'ract. I'd feel better, though, ef I knowed jest where Black Ivan hangs up. Can't see why he ain't got airy light in the winder."

Although the Tom-cat was trying to treat the matter with grim pleasantry, he was sorely puzzled. He knew not in what direction to look for the outlaws. Finally he got down on his hands and knees and felt his way slowly along, moving directly away from the falls. After proceeding in this way for what seemed to him an interminable time, a sudden bend in the passage revealed a light.

It came from a wood fire that blazed and leaped in the center of an oblong chamber. After passing the angle the passage widened away, and on either side were dark and uncanny shadows.

Without a moment's hesitation the cowboy slipped into the protection of these shadows and worked his way toward the fire.

He soon saw a group of men beyond the fire. They were eating supper, and the savory odors of the dishes came to him in appetizing whiffs. Till then he had not realized that he was so hungry.

A further advance brought the tables plainly into view, and at Ivan's side he saw the object of his search, Molly, his beloved wife!

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### A HOPELESS OUTLOOK.

TOM-CAT gave a gasp that was half joy and half anguish. Whatever the perils that surrounded her, Molly was yet alive, and evidently unharmed.

With great difficulty he repressed an indignant cat-howl as he saw the outlaw chief bend his head and speak to her.

At the further end of the table, brought into view as he stole forward, was the dark-skinned beauty, Hazel Thornpath. Stories of the outlaw queen had floated into Silver City, and fancy had painted her charms with a free hand. Now, as the Tom-cat gazed at her for the first time, he was forced to admit that the recitals were not exaggerated.

"A handsome heifer, but she don't come up to my Molly," was his loyal comment. "It's a pity that she's standin' in with such a lot o' villains."

He was as near now as he could get without risk of detection. How he longed to rush forward, strike Captain Ivan to the earth, and rescue his wife!

"I b'lieve it could be done," he gritted, working his hands spasmodically. "Hanged ef I ain't a notion to try it! I could almost have her out o' hyer afore they knowed what'd happened."

But he forced himself into calmness and awaited, with gnawing impatience, the close of the evening meal.

After supper the outlaws gathered in little knots to talk and smoke, and the women retired into their own apartment. For a long time the brigand chief paced gloomily up and down in front of the fire; then he, too, disappeared, and

one by one the groups melted away as the evening advanced.

Several of the men stretched themselves in front of the now smoldering fire, as if with the intention of remaining there throughout the night.

"Can't stand it any longer!" the cowboy growled. "I've wasted too much time a'ready. It may take a power o' s'archin' to find Molly in this black hole."

He once more crept forward, keeping as much as possible within the shadows. It was necessary, however, for him to cross the open space still dimly lighted by the dying fire. To do this, without detection, he resorted to his old practice of crawling, and got across safely.

Before him was the passage into which he had seen Molly and Hazel disappear. The light penetrated some little distance along it, but did not reach the chamber where the women were.

Still crawling, he gained this chamber—being made aware of the fact by the sudden widening of the passage—and then stopped to listen. Then to his ears came the sounds of regular breathing, denoting that the place was occupied and the occupants asleep.

"Molly!" he whispered, "Molly! Air you hyer?"

There was a stir that indicated that he had been heard.

"Who is it?" came the cautious question.

"It's me—Tom-cat! Is that you, Molly?"

"What's the matter?" queried Hazel. "What are you sitting up in bed for?"

"I thought I heard some one calling."

"Who was it? Lieutenant Carlton?"

Molly had leaped from the bed and was hastily dressing.

"I believe I heard some one," she answered.

"I'm going to investigate."

"This is some trick of yours, Molly Tenterden. You are shaking so that you can hardly talk. You mean to try to escape, and Carlton's aiding you, I know!"

Molly's tongue was silent, but her fingers flew nimbly.

"Don't be silly!" she exclaimed, when Hazel again commenced her questioning. "I ain't spoken to Carlton since we talked about him."

"Then it's the Tom-cat!" cried Hazel, roused into sudden alarm. "Help! Help! HELP!"

"We must run fer it!" shouted the Tom-cat, now throwing all caution aside. "Come, my dear! don't stop fer her yelpin'. We kin git out o' hyer 'fore they know what's up."

She came up to him, and, seizing her arm, he hurried with her along the passage.

Those cries for help were ringing wildly, and the outlaws began to pour into the central cavern, excited and alarmed.

"Run!" urged the Tom-cat, releasing her arm.

"Run, while I beat the devils off."

Panting and wild-eyed, Molly hurried toward the dimly-lighted opening.

A series of screeching and blood-curdling cat-howls rung along the underground arches; and the Tom-cat, a revolver in each hand, leaped toward the startled men like an enraged mountain-lion.

"Spt—spt—spt! Mee-ow-ow!"

Then, as the panic-stricken outlaws, not knowing what force he had behind him, seemed on the point of flight, he sheered off and dashed after Molly.

"Follow him!" shouted the deep voice of Black Ivan. "Don't be a set of cowards! He's alone."

His weapon flashed as he spoke; the angry men bounded forward like unleashed hounds; and the cavern seemed instantly turned into pandemonium. The rush of feet over the yielding sand, the Babel of excited shouts and the rattle of firearms drowned the roar of the distant waterfall.

For a time it appeared quite likely that the fugitives would escape. But a number of outlaws, awakened by the uproar, streamed out of one of the side passages and hemmed them in.

The Tom-cat, backing away from those in pursuit, was waving his revolvers threateningly and filling the chamber with his cat-cries, and so was not aware of this reinforcement until they were almost upon him.

Molly, retreating at his side, discovered them first, but the discovery came too late to be of much service.

"Better give in," she urged. "We're surrounded and can't get away. Don't shoot any of them, dear!" as the Tom-cat turned savagely at bay.

So far he had used his revolvers only to threaten. He was not a lover of bloodshed, and had fired above the heads of the advancing men. Molly had noted this, but feared that

now, frenzied by desperation, he might shoot to slay and thus bring upon his head a terrible vengeance.

Dropping the hammers of his revolvers, he used the weapons as clubs, and rushed furiously at the new-comers. Those in pursuit, seeing the state of affairs, had ceased their wild firing and were now closing in at a quick run.

For a few moments it seemed that the Tom-cat would overwhelm all opposition, so desperate was his onset. But it was not possible for any man, single-handed, to break through that living girdle. He would not surrender, however, and was finally stricken to the earth, bleeding and senseless.

Ivan's rage was great. Yet, great as it was, it scarcely equaled his surprise. To find the Tom-cat there, in their secret fastness, when they believed him in Silver City, was so unexpected and astounding that it had the air of mystery.

Molly had been retaken before her husband was stricken down, and the two were now brought in front of the fire.

The Tom-cat soon recovered and sat up, defiant and watchful. Molly was weeping bitterly.

"Don't cry!" he urged, reaching out his bound hands toward her. "There was never a bad piece o' bizness but what it mo'ut 'a' been wuss. We mo'ut 'a' been killed, ye know."

This was feeble consolation to the unhappy woman whose hopes had risen so high but a few minutes before.

Hazel attempted to console her, but under the circumstances, she could offer no words of comfort. She had given the alarm that had destroyed all hopes of escape. Remembering this, Molly was deaf to the honeyed words of the black-eyed beauty.

"Don't!" she protested finally, irritated beyond measure. "You make me think of a purring mountain-cat."

A wicked look came into Hazel's face, and an angry rebuff was on her lips, but it was stayed by her brother.

"Look you, now, my man!" he cried, fiercely. "I want to know how you found your way into this place. You might as well speak the truth at first, for I mean to have it."

The Tom-cat surveyed him with intense scorn. "Well, you won't git it by bullyraggin'. I ain't your man ef I knows myself. I wouldn't be caught dead among sich a lot o' kyotes, ef I could he'p myself."

The frown upon Ivan's brow showed that the speech did not please him.

"That isn't answering my question. And you've got to answer it! How did you get in here?"

"Walked in," declared the Tom-cat, gravely.

"I suppose so, seeing that you haven't wings. And of course you came through the falls. Your wet clothes show that. But how did you know there was a cave beyond the falls? And how did you manage to trail us?"

"As fer trailin' ye, I done that by bein' extry cautious. Thar was no need that I sh'ud stick my feet into yer traps even ef you did put 'em out thar fer that purpose. An' as fer the waterfall trick, you p'inted that out yourself."

"How?" with a look of astonishment.

"Why, after you got done monkeyin' with your lookin'-glass out thar, you walked through the falls, an' o' course, I knowed then you had your den back of it."

The face of the outlaw chief became black as a thunder-cloud.

"Well, the information won't do you or any one else much good. Just over there you can hear the gurgle of the Devil's Tea-kettle and you can see the steam rising from it. There's where I put such fellows and I've never known any of them to get out."

Molly shuddered convulsively at these ominous words, but the Tom-cat only smiled defiantly.

"Yes; I low ye kin kill me! 'Most any coward c'u'd do that, under the sarcumstances. But, it's precious little good it'll do ye. I s'pose ye don't think I come all the way hyer by myself?"

The brigand started, and the cowboy, seeing his advantage, quickly followed it up.

"Thar's a hull when o' fellers not very fur off. Puttin' me out o' the way won't rid ye of them."

Without telling a direct falsehood, the Tom-cat thus induced the chief to believe that a band of men were in waiting who also knew the secret.

"I think you're lying, Tom-cat: but if every word you say is true, it wouldn't save you. I have wanted to get my grip on you for a long time. You know why. So you can prepare to meet death in the morning," and Ivan turned

away. As he did so Molly staggered to her feet, and, with a wild, convulsive shriek, threw herself at the side of her condemned husband.

#### CHAPTER X. FOILED.

As has been stated in previous chapters, Hazel Thornpath, without any cause whatever, was insanely jealous of Molly Tenterden. More than once she had flamed into anger when Carlton's name was broached; and because of this, Molly sometimes found her presence quite unendurable.

This had been the state of affairs only the day before. Hazel had wept and stormed by turns, then had pleaded for forgiveness, and that night had fallen asleep by Molly's side, with tear-wet eyes.

When Molly repulsed her so harshly, after the capture of the Tom-cat, she had gone away, biting her red lips and vowing revenge. But, when she had returned to her room, and, by lapse of time, become cooler, an idea more pleasing than that of vengeance came to her.

Molly's presence was a constant source of irritation. Were it not for the Tom-cat's wife, she believed she could gain Carlton's love. Why not arrange affairs so that he would not be likely to see her again? Not in a cold-blooded manner, but in a way to confer a favor on her supposed rival.

She shivered and looked guiltily around, as the thought took shape. To put it in execution would be an act of treason to her father and the outlaws. But what woman reasons calmly when the interests of her heart are in the balance? And what will she not dare?

Hazel was especially prone to pursue her own inclinations, with a reckless disregard of consequences.

The plan, as finally developed, was no less than the release of the prisoners. The Tom-cat had been drawn there in search of his wife. If he could escape with her he would doubtless hasten, with all speed, toward Silver City. With the start of a few hours, his skill would enable him to baffle pursuit, and thus she would be rid of the woman she feared.

The plan resolved on, her next care was to arrange some method by which it could be carried out without peril to herself. Her father was hot-blooded and obstinate, and he might even be tempted to sacrifice his daughter if he thought her unfaithful to his interests. But think of it as she would, she could discover no way to release them without taking upon herself great risks.

The prisoners were near the fire, bound, but not closely guarded. The fire, however, was burning brightly, and every half-hour one of the outlaws arose and fed it with fresh fuel.

Hazel stole softly into the passage leading to the principal chamber and surveyed the scene with blazing eyes. It was past midnight, and all of the outlaws seemed wrapped in slumber. The flickering shadows caused by the leaping firelight formed suggestive shapes here and there, but she stifled her fears and crept quietly forward.

The murmur of the cascade sounded hoarse and threatening, and she was painfully aware of her own heart-beats.

Believing that a bold front would lessen her danger in case of discovery, she walked to the fire without any effort at concealment. The guards were asleep, and even the man whose duty it was to feed the flames appeared wholly unconscious.

An impatient toss of the arms showed that the Tom-cat was still awake. And, considering her intense anxiety, it was quite likely that Molly was in the same condition.

Hazel coolly watched the sleeping men for a few moments, and then bent over the prisoners.

"I am a friend," she whispered, as the Tom-cat stared at her. "I'm glad you're awake."

As she said it she deftly cut the cords that held him.

"Lie still!" she cautioned, as he was about to rise.

When she had released Molly she obtained the Tom-cat's revolvers and gave them to him.

"Now, follow me, and don't breathe until we are out of here!"

With this she stepped lightly away, and the Tom-cat, clasping his wife's hand, trod softly at her heels.

They were just beyond the circle of firelight when a curse and a loud yell announced the discovery of their escape.

"Come!" Hazel whispered, excitedly. "I will have to show you the way out now. You cannot travel fast in this unfamiliar place, and they will certainly overtake you."

"But won't it place you in great danger?" Molly questioned.

"Yes; but it can't be avoided. Your husband will be killed if retaken. I want to help you away. Don't talk any, but follow me."

The chamber they had just left was now filled with cries and exclamations of rage, and sounds of pursuit began to be heard.

Hazel knew that it would be impossible for her to return, now. Once she thought of simply pointing out the way and taking refuge for herself in one of the side passages. But, she knew that these would be searched with torches and that, if found, she could scarcely explain her presence there.

She finally concluded that she would accompany the fugitives beyond the waterfall, then hide among the rocks and join the pursuers in such a way that suspicion would be averted.

She was as fleet as a fawn and Molly, at least, had great difficulty in keeping near her. The calls of the pursuing outlaws came closer and closer, but the roaring cascade was now at hand and into it they dashed, heedless of the plunging water.

"Now take to the rocks!" cried Hazel as they emerged. "I've done all I can for you."

But, before they could obey her, or she could seek safety for herself, the churning of hoofs was heard just before them and the light of a bull's-eye lantern flashed along the stream.

"Hello! Pris'ners tryin' to git away!" exclaimed a savage voice. "Thought I heard some kind o' yawpin' behind the falls."

Hazel uttered a scream of fright as she recognized the man and saw that the channel was filled with armed horsemen. They were a detachment of the outlaw band sent out that night by Ivan to search for the party that the Tom-cat had said was in the vicinity. Their return was most inopportune and seemed to destroy all chances of escape.

"Go, Tom!" urged Molly, when she realized that they were hemmed in. "They won't hurt me, but they'll kill you if they take you. Get away if you can, and then bring up them men. I am sure you can do it, and get me out of here in spite of 'em."

Hazel was wringing her hands in a very paroxysm of despair. She realized that, now, denials and subterfuges would be useless. That blinding light had revealed her duplicity.

As for the Tom-cat, he recognized the wisdom of his wife's advice. Both could not escape, and it was a question if he could do so, though alone.

His first thought was to shoot out the light. Quickly his revolver swept forward. There was a dull click—the damp cartridge had failed to explode! With a lightning like movement he hurled the useless revolver at the horseman's breast. It struck him fairly, the lantern dropped from his hand and was extinguished in the water. In the confusion that followed, the Tom-cat leaped away, and, at the same instant, the pursuers in the cavern burst through the falls.

#### CHAPTER XI.

##### A RASH ACT.

At their head was Captain Ivan, and when, by the faint starlight he saw his daughter there, at Molly's side, his rage broke all bounds. Words were not needed to tell him that she had released the captives and piloted them away!

Hazel's dripping garments, blanched cheeks, and terror-filled eyes, were sufficient witnesses.

"You she-devil!" he howled, lifting his hand as if to strike her. "This is your work, is it? And I trusted you so!"

His hand fell as he saw several of the men dart away in pursuit of the Tom-cat.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded. "I will have a settlement with you when I return."

He joined the chase, and Hazel, fear-stricken, looked about as if thinking of flight. But a number of her father's most trusted followers closed about her, and Molly and she realized that such an attempt would be useless.

She gazed around in search of Carlton, intending to implore his protection. But he had also joined in the search for the Tom-cat.

"Better go back into the cave," urged one of the men, in a tone that was respectful yet firm. "Tain't no place for the likes o' you, out hyer."

Molly was straining her ears, hoping almost against hope that the fugitive would escape, and yet fearing that he could not. However, at the

command of the man she turned and accompanied Hazel through the waterfall. The men followed closely at her heels.

When they regained the central chamber, the one who had assumed the responsibility of leader, ordered the woman into Hazel's apartment, and stationed a guard at the entrance.

Molly was pale but quite calm as she changed her clothing and lighted the lamps. Hazel, on the contrary, wet as she was, threw herself carelessly on the bed, and sobbed as if her heart would break. She had utterly failed to accomplish her purpose, and her treachery had become known to her father.

"Go away!" she cried, fiercely, as Molly approached her with soothing words. "You are the cause of this! I didn't care anything for that detestable Tom-cat, but I wanted *you* out of here."

A pitying light came into Molly's eyes. She did not wholly understand this almost incomprehensible creature. But she saw before her a woman in distress, and was touched by the sight.

"Why, Hazel—"

"No! I don't want you to say anything to me!" Hazel raged. "I—I feel like striking you dead. I wish I had never seen you. Oh, father! Carlton!"

She wept convulsively; and Molly seeing that her presence made matters worse, withdrew to the other side of the room.

Two hours later Ivan and his men returned, and Molly, peering through the passage, saw, to her great joy, that her husband was not with them.

Ivan came directly into the apartment, where they were, his brow black with rage and his Gypsy blood boiling.

"Now I want to know what you mean by that crazy caper?" seizing the girl by the shoulder and pulling her from the bed. "Speak up before I lose my temper and do something I'll be sorry for! If you wasn't my own daughter, I'd have shot you out there at the fall."

Hazel faced him, sullen and defiant.

"Speak!" he demanded, trembling violently.

"Kill me!" she cried. "Kill me! I don't want to live any longer!" and she again gave way to a wild outburst of weeping.

Black Ivan stared at her as if mystified. Was it possible that she was becoming insane?

"What foolery is this, Hazel?" his brows once more contracting. "I can't stand theatricals to-night. If you're wise you will stop that sniveling and answer my questions. I suppose this woman bribed you. Tell me about it."

"I won't!" she declared, with dogged determination.

"Have a care, Hazel!"

"I won't!" with a stamp of her little foot and a shake of her black mane. "You can't make me! So, there now!"

He gasped with rage at this bold declaration and seemed on the point of striking her with a revolver. But he evidently thought better of it, and, again grasping her by the shoulder, hurried her to the central chamber.

"I ought to hurl you into the Devil's Teakettle!" he hissed. "But, traitor as you are, I can't forget that you are my daughter. I'll see what bread and water, sweetened with solitude, will do toward breaking your spirit."

His voice rung out harshly and several men hastened to him.

Quickly he issued his commands, fearing, perhaps, that he might relent; and Hazel, still sullen and unconquered, was bound and placed in one of the gloomy passages.

For a long time Ivan paced moodily up and down in front of it; hoping that his daughter, subdued by the terrors of her situation, would relent and call to him. But she did not; and he finally stalked away with a bitter curse.

When the Tom-cat dashed away in the darkness, he made straight for the boulder-strewn slope of the mountain. But, the perils of so swift a flight were scarcely less than those behind him.

The way was rocky, uneven and filled with pit-falls. In addition, the outlaws, thoroughly familiar with the ground, were spreading themselves out in such a way that escape seemed almost impossible.

"It won't do to tumble into a hole and break a leg!" he soliloquized, as he halted to listen. "An' that's jes' what I'll do ef I keep on at this rate. I'll haf' to turn myself into a lizard, I guess."

With this, he squeezed himself into a depression, and, with characteristic equanimity, awaited the approach of the outlaws. Even then their footfalls were sounding uncomfortably near.

"I'm all right ef some one don't step onto me er tumble over me."

He thrust out his head like a tortoise emerging from its shell, and drew his remaining revolver, to be prepared for such an emergency.

"Right here's where I heard him last!" said a voice. He couldn't 'a' gone on without makin' some kind o' racket."

The gathering road-agents spread themselves out like a fan and began to beat the ground as a pointer beats a meadow. More than once they passed within a few feet of the Tom-cat's hiding-place. But he was not discovered and they continued on down the mountain.

"I guess I'll stay hyer!" he commented. "Like the man who squatted in the hole made by the first cannon-ball, I don't 'low they'll be apt to hit the same place ag'in. They'll s'arch other territory."

The astute cowboy was right in this; and he finally heard them return to the cave by another route.

It would have been the part of wisdom to set out at once for the rendezvous at Painted Rock. But the Cowboy Detective was more noted for reckless daring than cool judgment. Assured of his own safety, he was now consumed by a desire to know what had befallen Molly. He feared that, after what had occurred, she would be roughly used by the road-agent chief. The thought stirred him to desperation.

"I mus' go back! Seems to me I kin hear her callin' me. Ef that air Black Ivan lays so much as the weight o' his finger on her, I'll shoot him down, ef I die fer it the next minute!"

"Yes, I 'low I ort to go to Painted Rock at onc't, an' I will go afore the sun rises. But I'm boun' to take a look into that hole first. I know the way, now, an' kin do it without any danger."

But the night had flown more rapidly than the Tom-cat suspected. Hurried on by its many excitements, he had not counted the fleeting hours. Now, as he lifted his head and looked across the crest of Devil's Mountain, he saw the first faint radiance of the coming day.

The sight filled him with dismay. He would not have time to penetrate to the cavern and he feared to begin the journey to Painted Rock. Doubtless there were watchers on the mountain slopes.

"Corralled!" he groaned.

To lie there all day without water and with very little to eat, and that little almost unsavory, was not a pleasant prospect. He had started out with an abundance of food stowed away in his capacious pockets. It was all gone now except a few bits of dried beef. And these, since their drenching, seemed more like pieces of wet leather than anything else.

As the light increased he noticed that the cavity, where he was lying, was partly shelved over. Crawling under the projection as far as possible, he arranged some small boulders about him in the most natural manner. In this prostrate condition he prepared to pass the day.

His weariness was so great that, notwithstanding his anxiety, he soon fell into a deep sleep from which he did not awaken till past noon.

He then found his position becoming intolerable, but he feared to change it. Never did an afternoon seem so long as that. He shifted and writhed, drew up his feet and thrust them down again, and with maledictions on his ill-luck and enforced idleness, wore out the tedious hours.

He had fully made up his mind to revisit the cavern before going to Painted Rock. He believed he could do that and yet have time to bring up the waiting force ere morning.

As soon as it was dark enough to render his movements invisible, he crept down to the stream, ate the last of his dried beef and washed it down with copious draughts of the clear cold water. He felt better after that, and more like the redoubtable, impetuous Tom-cat we have known.

His advance toward the cascade was cautious in the extreme. He feared the banks of the stream might be lined with sentinels, but he neither saw nor heard anything to justify this fear and reached the gloomy passage leading to the cavern in safety.

From this point he progressed slowly on his hands and knees. When at the bend, the central chamber was revealed by the dancing fire-light, he was made aware that something unusual had occurred. The road-agents were rushing excitedly here and there; and from words that drifted to him, he learned that Molly was missing.

A great fear had tugged at his heart. Had she endeavored to escape? If so, she would become lost in the wilderness that lay toward Silver City.

## CHAPTER XII.

## FALSE AS FAIR.

HAZEL THORNPETH, when left bound in the gloomy passage, sobbed aloud in her passionate anger. For a time, she hated all things earthly. She was even deeply incensed against Carlton, because he had made no effort to prevent this humiliation.

"I would like to crush them all!" she exclaimed, with fierce bitterness.

As the hours passed, however, her love for Carlton regained its ascendancy.

It was a blind, unreasoning love, whimsical and fantastic rather than clear and steady. Her education, or rather lack of education, had not taught her repression, and she allowed herself to lavish her affections where they were unsought and apparently uncared for.

"He *shall* love me yet!" she hissed, closing her white teeth firmly. "He shall! He shall!"

How to bring about this desired result puzzled her sorely.

For hours she reclined upon the yielding sand, wrinkling her brows in thought, forgetful of the pain of her bound wrists and ankles. Then the lines relaxed, and the look of a fiend blotted out the beauty of her features.

Immediately she began to tug at her bonds, writhing, twisting, and groaning in her efforts to remove them. Finding she was only drawing them tighter, she applied her white teeth to the leather thongs about her wrists. She worked at them with patient energy for many minutes, and succeeded finally in undoing the knots. Then she removed the cords from her ankles, and was free.

But the time for action had not come. A hum of voices from the central cavern showed that it was filled with men. She ventured to the end of the passage, and stood for some time watching and listening. Then she crept back, replaced, as well as she could, the bonds loosely upon her ankles and wrists, and assumed her old attitude.

"I must wait," she whispered, pantingly. "My time will come by and by. Those men can't stay in there always."

She sat up, rocked herself to and fro, and laughed in a low, hysterical way.

"Yes, my time will come! How I will mock when she screams and prays to me! 'If there is an obstacle in your way, remove it by fair means or foul.' That is the motto of the League of Devil's Mountain; and am I not a member of that League?"

She shivered as if oppressed by her thoughts, and to divert them strained her ears to catch the hum from the cavern.

It was now day, but the gloom in those underground chambers revealed not a sign of it. There darkness and daylight came and went all unnoticed.

After a little her morning meal was brought to her by Carlton. He stuck a torch in the wall, removed the thongs from her wrists, and endeavored to talk to her as she ate. But she answered only in monosyllables. Finding his efforts were unavailing, he also relapsed into silence, and, when she had finished, retied the bonds about the extended wrists, and went away.

"The brute!" she exclaimed, as the darkness again veiled her. "He, at least, might have shown me some consideration. Instead, he ties me up as if I was a madwoman. Oh! why do I love that man?"

She wrenched fiercely at the thongs. To her surprise they yielded and lay quite loosely about her wrists. Her heart softened at this. Carlton had been more thoughtful of her comfort than she had believed.

"Perhaps he even loves me," she murmured. "Men are such strange creatures. They school themselves to conceal their real feelings until the habit becomes second nature."

The reflection was so pleasant and soothing that it drove the bitterness from her heart, and brought about a dream-like, languorous state that finally merged into refreshing sleep.

How long she slept she did not know. When she awoke she found food and drink at her side. The central cavern was strangely silent.

"The men have again gone in search of the Tom-cat!" hurriedly throwing off her bonds. "This is my opportunity."

She arose, forgetful alike of hunger, thirst, and cramped limbs. Creeping softly to the end of the passage she looked out upon the smoldering fire.

The cavern was not wholly deserted, but the few men in it were evidently asleep.

"Yes, they have gone after the Tom-cat, and to judge by appearances, have been away some

time. I must work quickly, or I may be discovered and my plans spoiled."

As the fire was low, the greater part of the chamber was plunged in darkness. She kept within the deepest of the shadows and moved softly toward her own apartment, where she expected to find Molly.

"Ah! you are there, my dear?" she cooed, gliding in as she saw Molly sitting in the lamp-light. At the same time she placed her finger to her lips warningly.

Molly had been weeping. Her face was white and haggard. Evidently her gentle heart had been cruelly torn by the events of the past few hours. She knew that Black Ivan's men had gone out again in pursuit of her husband. And her fancy pictured him dead or dying, or at least being chased over the mountains like a partridge.

"I have come to save you," Hazel whispered, impressively. "I failed before, but I shall not fail again."

"What of my husband?" Molly questioned, like a loyal wife, her thoughts turning first to the man she loved.

"I think I know where he is, and I will take you to him."

There was something in the smooth, liquid tones that carried a feeling of distrust. And, besides, Molly could not forget Hazel's passionate outbursts.

"How do you know where he is?" eying her with clear, unshrinking gaze.

"Don't talk!" urged Hazel. "The guards are asleep, but they may wake at any time. If we do anything, we must do so at once. I was left tied up like a bucking broncho, but I slipped out of the cords and here I am. I tried to release you once, and, if you're willing, I will do so yet."

"Of course I don't expect you to think I'm actuated by pure charity. You know me too well for that. Charity is all very well in its way, no doubt, but I acknowledge I am humanly selfish. I want you out of here because you stand between me and Carlton."

"Delightfully frank, ain't I? And there's another thing that urges me, that is revenge. Ivan tied me up and has been keeping me on bread and water for what I did last night. I mean to get even with him. I will set you free; then slip back into my prison, demurely put the ropes over my hands and feet, and laugh at his rage when he finds you gone."

"But come, I mustn't stand here chattering. Minutes are precious."

Molly flushed and paled as hope and doubt struggled for the mastery.

"Oh, my dear, you are not deceiving me?" was her eager, pitiful query.

"Why should I?" with a guilty start. "I never tell falsehoods when truth will answer as well."

"I must do as you say, Hazel. I can't throw away any chance. But, oh! may Heaven's curse fall on you if you are fooling me."

Hazel shivered a little, but she concealed her nervousness by renewing her protestations. And Molly, still doubting and hoping, made ready to follow her.

"It will be impossible for us to go out by the falls," Hazel whispered, as she neared the main chamber. "That passage is full of sentinels. But I know of another way by which we can leave the place."

She was actually trembling now that success seemed near. No doubt her agitation was increased by the fear of her father's return. Should this second act of treason be discovered, death might be her portion. There was also the danger that some of the men might awake and discover her absence or the absence of Molly.

"We must hurry!" she exclaimed, as these thoughts flitted through her mind. "It will never do to be caught now."

Molly was equally anxious and hastened after her through the black shadows.

The fire was sputtering in a sickly way and the men were still sleeping when they reached the large apartment.

"This way," said Hazel, clutching Molly by the hand. And she guided her into a dark passage leading directly away from the falls.

"Wasn't one of them men Carlton?" Molly asked.

"I believe so," Hazel snapped, not at all pleased with the question. "I hope you didn't want to stop and say good-by to him."

Molly smiled, in spite of the gravity of the situation. Hazel's insane jealousy verged, sometimes, on the ludicrous.

On, on they went, plunging, as it seemed, into the very heart of the mountain. Occasion-

ally they stumbled, causing the boulders to clatter about them in a frightening way. But Hazel appeared to be thoroughly familiar with the winding passage. Here and there it was intersected by galleries striking off into unknown depths. Sometimes it narrowed until they were forced to crawl on their hands and knees. And then it widened and lifted as they could tell by the echoes of their feet.

Suddenly it doubled on itself and began to descend. Gradually at first but soon precipitately. A muffled roar was heard and Molly believed the were again approaching they waterfall.

"We're nearing the end," Hazel exclaimed, pressing Molly's hand encouragingly.

Then the passage widened away into a vast cavern, the roar became deafening and a faint light sifting through an aperture above revealed a mad, mountain torrent.

"Where are we?" asked Molly, staring at the mist that floated lazily toward the point from which the light came.

"Where are we?" with a hysterical laugh. "Why, we have been circling for a good half-hour, and are now directly under the sleeping men and the camp-fire. The light you see, comes from the fire, and this is the bottom of the Devil's Tea-kettle!"

There was something in the voice that caused Molly to look about in alarm. Hazel's face, dimly revealed, had assumed a fiendish expression.

"Ha ha, ha!" drawing a knife and springing backward. "Attack me at your peril. No one knows the way to this place but me. I knew the way out of the cavern was guarded, and, as I couldn't release you, I determined to place you where you would never again come between me and Carlton. You can see the light, but you can't get to it and you may howl to your heart's content with the assurance that this roar will drown it all."

Before Molly, dazed by this treachery, could frame a reply, Hazel darted into the gloom and disappeared.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### SENTENCED.

BLACK IVAN was in no good humor when he returned from that unavailing search for the Tom-cat. He was anxious and perturbed. The Cowboy Detective had said that he had a band of men somewhere in waiting. Black Ivan's men had failed to find any trace of them.

The outlaw chief had dispatched messengers to the sharpshooters, and these were now coming in. Since the Tom-cat had passed them, it was useless to keep them longer at their posts.

The return of the chief with the searching party, roused up the sleepers about the camp-fire.

"Curse the luck," exclaimed Captain Ivan, addressing Carlton, who seemed scarcely yet awake. "The fellow got away from us in spite of all we could do. If he wasn't lying about those men we may expect an attack before long."

As he spoke he removed the heavy yellow slicker which had protected him from the dash of the falls.

"I hardly think there is such a body of men," said Carlton, rubbing his eyes and yawning. "If there had been, he would have brought them in with him and obtained the advantage of a surprise. Now that we're warned we ought to be able to hold this place against a regiment."

"Yes, I suppose so," moodily. "But the Tom-cat is such a tricky chap you can't tell what form his appearance may take. If they come openly, we'll keep them out. More likely they'll slip in like weasels and pounce at our throats before we know they're near."

He hung up his dripping hat and began to vent his spleen upon a couple of sharpshooters who had just arrived from the trail.

"If you fellows hadn't been as blind as burrowing moles, he couldn't have passed you!"

"He never came that way!" declared one of the men, mustering a show of spirit.

"Bah! He couldn't have come any other."

Black Ivan choked with rage and disdain.

"Carlton, put some sentinels out on the mountain, and see that you choose men with at least a thimbleful of brains in their heads."

With this sharp command he lighted a torch, and strode toward the passage where Hazel was confined.

The girl's black eyes snapped wickedly as she saw her father approaching. Almost an hour

before she had returned, replaced her bonds, and become to all appearances a prisoner.

"You devilish jade!" he cried, noticing her defiant look. "I ought to tie you up by the thumbs and flay you with a stock-whip. What did you mean by releasing that scoundrel, anyway?"

Hazel laughed harshly.

"Of course I'll answer you, Ivan, when you ask in such gentle tones."

"Come, girl," he said, striving to control his wrath, "be reasonable for once."

"I will, when you release me. Not before."

"Ain't I your father, and haven't I a right to demand obedience?"

"I suppose so, and you can demand it until you are tired. You ought to know, though, that you can't conquer me in any such way as this."

She averted her face and refused to speak again, though he coaxed and threatened by turns for half an hour. Possibly he would have resorted to violence had he not been attracted to the central chamber by a loud outcry.

One of the men had discovered that Molly was gone!

Ivan could scarcely credit the statement.

"Are you sure?" he demanded, hurrying to the apartment with his torch. But no torch was needed to reveal that the cage was empty. The lamps on the little stand lighted the place.

"A pretty set of numbskulls you are!" he fumed, as he hurried about. "While we were hunting for the Tom-cat outside, he crept in here and stole his wife away, under your very noses!"

"Carlton!" turning fiercely upon that individual, "you were left in command of the cavern. I suppose this is a specimen of your boasted vigilance. You can take your place in the ranks and I'll look up some one else for lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," answered Carlton, quite subdued by the fierce outburst.

"Perhaps they are still in some of the passages," he suggested, turning from his crushed follower. "Scatter, every one of you, and make a thorough search."

The road-agents sprung nimbly to do his bidding.

This was the state of affairs when the Tom-cat turned the bend and looked into the central cavern.

"Molly gone!" he gasped, as the words of the searchers floated to him. "That jes' beats all creation! Perhaps the gal helped her ag'in. Ef she's reely got away, though, she's shore to git lost in this 'tarnal hill country. Ef I'd on'y got hyer a little sooner!"

He crept as far forward as he dared, and listened wonderingly to the comments of the excited road-agents.

"Hookey! They think 'twas me! an' they're beatin' the cavern to find us. That air Black Ivan acts like he had the hydrophoby. I reckon, now, it wouldn't be healthy to fall into his grip."

He drew back into the shadows, scarcely knowing what course to pursue.

If Molly had not escaped to the open air, she would soon be discovered; and perhaps subjected to outrages and indignities at the hands of the irate chief.

"Ef they find her I'llow I'll be needed," he soliloquized, as he noted the heavy scowl on Black Ivan's face. "That man's a devil when his blood's up, an' jes' now it's nigh about the b'illin' pint. Ef they do find her, though, he wants to han'l' that temper kind o' easy."

He drew his revolver as he said it, and softly clicked the cylinder around. His eyes were blazing, and the old reckless spirit again had full possession of him.

The passage he was in was one of the first to be searched. He had anticipated this and thought himself prepared for it. But the searchers did not come directly from the fire as he had expected them to do. They appeared suddenly between him and the falls, having gained that point by another route, and came toward him with blazing torches.

"Throws me into close quarters!" he growled, crowding himself against the wall. "I can't go neither forward nor back'ard now without bein' seen."

Unfortunately the light of the torches penetrated to his place of concealment and caused his eyes to shine out like twin spots of green fire.

Ivan, who was leading the force, saw these and knew that they were the reflection of light from a pair of eyes. None of the others noticed them, and the point from which they could be seen was passed almost immediately.

The road-agent chief had all of a Gypsy's cunning, and refrained from giving any indication of his discovery.

"Search in there," he said, with a careless wave of his hand toward the point where the Tom-cat lay. At the same time he drew back, to be out of danger and guard the avenue of escape.

"Me-ow! Me-ow-ow-ow!" came the cowboy's war-cry, as he leaped toward the advancing men.

The screeching assault was made so suddenly that they recoiled in affright. But the stern commands of Black Ivan restored them to a semblance of order. For a few moments it seemed that the Tom-cat would actually break through their ranks and escape. He fought like a demon, dealing his blows right and left, and by deft movements avoiding them as they attempted to clutch him. His fierce cat-howls were caught up and repeated by the gloomy passages until one might fancy that a hundred angry felines were struggling for the mastery.

"Take him alive!" shouted Black Ivan, as he heard the ominous click of revolvers.

Some of the band, overthrown by the cowboy's impetuous rushes, were crowding forward, weapons in hand, with the intention of slaying him.

"Don't shoot!" warned the chief. "Take him alive! What! All of you fellows can't down him?"

The sneer in the words stung them to fury, and they threw themselves on the Tom-cat with such energy that he was borne down.

"Had to knock under to a rig'ment!" he gritted, as he lay panting and exhausted. "But I ain't whipped yit. Set me loose an' I'll take any two o' you at a time, an' ef I don't lick ye I'll own that I'm beat."

He looked at Ivan as if he hoped the black-browed chief would accept the offer.

"Where's your wife?" demanded the latter. "Where did you hide her?"

"Cool, that is. Cool as snowbanks in spring-time. Ask a man whar he's hid his own wife. 'Pears to me, pardner, 'at you've purty much took charge o' her lately."

"You won't answer, eh? Well, I don't know that it matters. If she's in the cavern we'll find her, by-and-by; and if she's not, she'll get lost in the hills."

"It's enough to know that we've got you. We've accomplished our principal object in carrying her away. Now, do you know what we are going to do with you?"

"Well, I hopes as how you're goin' to give me somethin' to eat. I'm holler, plum' to my toes."

Tom-cat was, in truth, almost famished.

"Yes, we'll give you something to eat. I want you to be in good condition for the performance that will take place soon."

The Tom-cat began to reply, but Ivan cut it short by ordering the men to move the prisoner forward. When they reached the fire, the raw-hide lariat was cut from his wrists, and he was given food and drink.

While he was eating, the brigand captain retired with Carlton and some others and held a whispered conversation.

"Eat heartily, my friend, for it will be your last meal," said the chief, when he returned to the fire.

Then he gave some orders that sent the men skurrying about in an excited way.

The Tom-cat had been sentenced to death. He was to be shot and his body allowed to drop into the Devil's Tea-kettle. A broad board was pushed across the misty chasm, and the preliminaries arranged.

The cowboy knew, full well, what the preparations portended, but he had faced death too often to quail now. If he must die he was ready, and would meet his fate undauntedly.

He looked at the quivering plank with calm and steady eyes, and wafted a prayer to the God of the oppressed that He would shield and watch over Molly, wherever she might be.

"Are you ready?" asked Captain Ivan coming forward when the cowboy had finished his leisurely meal.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I 'low. Seems to me, though, that ye air in a mighty hurry."

"I don't intend that you shall escape us again!" growled the chief.

Then the doomed man began to ply him with questions, evidently for the purpose of gaining time.

"What are you driving at?" the chief demanded, noting, as he thought, a hopeful look in the prisoner's eyes.

"Nothin'. But thar ain't many men likes to be hurried into the next world at railroad speed."

He rose to his feet and held out his hands for the lariat. Then he was conducted to a position in the center of the dizzy plank.

He had requested that his eyes should not be blindfolded and that he might be allowed to give the signal to the firing party, now drawn up, with Winchesters in readiness, only a few yards away.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### A MYSTERIOUS VOICE.

SUDDENLY a strange call, so faint as to be scarcely distinguishable, floated upward with the wreathing mists from the Devil's Tea-kettle! At the same instant the Tom-cat sprang from the plank and disappeared in the depths!

"Fire!" shouted Black Ivan, as he saw the cowboy lift himself for the leap. The command came too late. The rifles crashed, but the balls found no victim.

"By all the fiends! What does that mean?" roared the chief, rushing to the edge of the chasm. Only the blackness of darkness and the hum of the underground torrent greeted him.

His men crowded about him agape with wonder and surmise.

"Did any of you hear a voice, just before that fellow jumped?" he demanded looking up at them.

Some declared they did. Others had heard nothing of the kind.

"It jes' beats the record!" said a grizzled old scoundrel, with a wise shake of his head. "I've seen more than one man go in there, but it's the fust I ever knowed to go willin'."

"Mebbe 'twere suicide," suggested another, shading his eyes and peering into the gloom. "He knowed he would be killed and preferred to go that way."

"Well, we'll soon find out!" growled Black Ivan, rising to his feet. "Who will volunteer to go down there at the end of a rope?"

A few of the bravest stepped forward. Dare-devils can be found for any enterprise.

"A rope!" shouted the chief, when the volunteers were in readiness. And a number of lariats were soon produced.

They were quickly knotted and adjusted, and one of the volunteers thrust his legs through the noose at the end.

"Lower away!" came the stern command. "I don't see how the Tom-cat can be alive, but we'll soon know. I'm sure I heard a voice!"

None of them had ever before ventured to penetrate the mist-filled cleft. Occasionally, when the vapor lifted a little, one could see the gleam of the far-away waters.

The outlaws had always supposed the walls made a sheer descent to the stream; and had no idea that another cave lay beneath them.

As the man hung in mid-air and they began to lower away, a muffled report came from below, and bullet flattened itself against the rocks near the reckless fellow's head.

"Pull me out o' hyer!" he bawled, stricken with sudden terror. And the men who were clinging to the rope, hastily obeyed.

"Ketch me in thar ag'in, will ye?" as he scrambled over the rocky edge. "The Tom-cat's alive, an' don't ye fergit it; an' he's got a gun!"

His eyes were dilated and his face was ashy white.

Even Ivan seemed, for the moment, unnerved.

"That shot couldn't have been fired by the Tom-cat!" he declared. "He had no weapons. It was done by the man who called to him."

"There's one thing certain. There is a cave or ledge down there. Perhaps the men he spoke of have found a way to get to it. If so, they may scale the chasm at some point and give us trouble."

"'Twouldn't be a healthy job fer 'em!" growled the grizzled road-agent. "We c'd crack thar skulls fer 'em faster'n they could shove 'em up."

"Yes, I suppose so. But the whole thing worries me! They may get up by some path unknown to us. This cavern is full of passages that we don't know much about."

He was walking quickly backward and forward, as was his custom when nervous and irritated. Suddenly he noticed that one of their number was missing.

"Where's Carlton?" he thundered, sweeping the circle of faces with blazing eyes.

No one knew; and, up to that time, because of the flurry and excitement, no one had noticed that he was gone.

"There's treachery here!" Black Ivan asserted, in tones so low and grave that one would have supposed him quite calm, but for his blazing eyes. "Is any one else absent?"

Again he scanned the circle of faces.

Carlton alone had disappeared.

"Yes, there's devilish treachery!" the road-agent chief continued. "I'll warrant that Carlton is at the bottom of this affair. And it's a piece of revenge! He thinks to get even with me in this way, for reducing him to the ranks. Curse the scoundrel! I'll have his blood for this bit of work."

But, though Carlton's absence amply justified suspicion, this did not, by any means, solve the mystery. How had he managed to lower himself into the Devil's Tea-kettle without aid? How did he learn that there was a ledge or cave at its bottom?

"The fellow must have had help!" Black Ivan exclaimed, surveying his men with suspicion. "I feel sure, now, that Carlton fired that shot, and that when the Tom-cat fell into the water he managed in some way to rescue him. But I'd like to know how he got down there!"

"Er how he expects to get out," suggested one of the men.

Black Ivan stopped short.

"That is a point. There are only two ways. There is an underground outlet, or he will have to get help from above. If there are traitors among us what is to hinder him from doing that?"

The men shrunk from his distrustful glances. "How can I tell how many scoundrels of that stamp may be among us? The first was Duval! Now it is Carlton! Who is to be the next?"

The questions were hurled like shots from a repeating rifle.

Then his manner underwent a change.

"Stay here!" he commanded, and walked excitedly toward the passage where his daughter was.

A dim suspicion of the real feelings of Hazel for Carlton had recently crept into his mind; and the horrible suggestion had come, unbidden, that she might be likewise missing.

He picked up a torch and lighted it as he passed the fire, and flashed its light ahead of him as he entered the passage. Hazel was there, as he soon saw, her face still showing that her stubborn pride was unconquered. The knowledge that she had not accompanied Carlton was a relief, but it did not wholly dissipate his mistrust. Perhaps she had known of Carlton's intended treachery and plans.

"You have been listening to the excitement out there?"

"Yes," she replied, "when you tied me up here, you didn't think to stop my ears."

"I suppose you know what it all means?"

"I have an idea."

"Well, when I left you, I found that Molly had escaped. In our search for her we ran across the Tom-cat. We were about to mete out to him the usual punishment given to traitors and enemies. Before the men could fire, a voice came out of the chasm, and he leaped from the plank and escaped."

"I supposed as much," coldly.

"And did your acute senses tell you that Carlton had also disappeared?"

She started slightly, but whether from guilt or surprise, he could not tell.

"You do not say anything!" a scowl on his black brows.

"What can I say, Ivan? What do you expect me to say?"

"What part you had in planning this affair?" he cried. "How much of his intentions did Carlton tell you?"

"Nothing!" with fierce vehemence. "There's some mistake, Ivan. Probably Carlton has gone away for a different reason. It must be! Oh, God!"

She turned her face from her father, and began to sob convulsively.

Ivan's was not a pitying heart, but it was touched now, and he left her to wrestle alone with her grief.

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### A REVELATION.

It was a terrible leap that the Tom-cat took. His head reeled as he plunged swiftly downward. Then, after what seemed an age of time, he struck the icy waters of the torrent. Down, down he went until his feet touched the rocky bottom. Bound as he was, he could do little to aid himself. His ears rung, and his lungs seemed bursting. Then hurled forward by the rushing current, he rose slowly to the surface.

When his head came into view, a bold swimmer plunged into the stream and dragged him ashore.

It was Carlton!

Yet, was it Carlton? There was the same sinewy form and the same clothing, though

drenched, to be sure. But the face had undergone a great transformation. It was as if a mask had been removed from it.

At the rescuer's side stood Molly, weeping and laughing by turns. Before the cowboy could free his eyes from the blinding water, she prostrated herself at his side, and covered his face with kisses.

"Sound as a top!" he shivered, endeavoring to caress her with his bound hands. "Hooray for Brentwood, the Border Badger! May he live forever!"

Yes, reader, Tim Carlton was none other than Bruce Brentwood, the famous detective and old-time pard of the Tom-cat.

It will be remembered that when Hazel Thornpath conducted Molly by those winding passages into the lower cavern, Carlton was among the sleepers around the fire. The movements of the women awakened him and roused his curiosity.

He knew that Hazel was by nature quite as treacherous as she was beautiful. Moved by pity, he had secured her bonds rather loosely, and so was not greatly surprised to find her free. But he was surprised to see her leading Molly along in that mysterious way.

Getting up softly, he slipped after the retreating women. The passage which they had entered was a very gloomy one, but he was able to follow them quite readily by the sounds of their footsteps.

He regulated his pace to theirs, halting when they halted, and pressing on when they pressed on. At the same time he took careful note of the directions and distance, that he might return easily.

He was only a few yards away when Hazel paused by the underground river and revealed her base deception to the startled Molly.

Fearing his absence from among the sleepers would be noticed, he retraced his way, and was apparently snoring profoundly when Hazel came back and crept into her prison. But she had no sooner disappeared than he started to return.

When he reached the bottom of the Devil's Tea-kettle this second time he found Molly sitting by the stream, weeping as if her heart would break. By a few deft changes he transformed himself from Carlton, the road-agent, into Brentwood, the detective—a man well known to the Tom-cat's wife.

Then he revealed himself, to Molly's inexpressible joy.

He remained with her a long time, comforting and consoling her, and planning for her escape. Then he returned to the chamber above, and was found there by Ivan when the latter came back from his search for the cowboy.

When the Tom-cat was sentenced, Brentwood conceived the plan of rescue that was afterward carried out. Making a feint of examining the bonds of the cowboy, he managed, in a few whispered words to reveal his identity and convey the details of his scheme.

It seemed a desperate chance, but the Tom-cat grasped at it eagerly, and from that moment commenced those petty delays to gain time.

Brentwood now slipped away, and hurried with all speed to the point where Molly was awaiting him. Her anxiety for the safety of her husband was intense when he told her what had occurred. She knew, however, that he had hit on the only feasible plan of rescue and thanked him profusely.

The aperture above was for a greater portion of the time, hid by the mist; but he saw the board when it was thrust across and also saw the cowboy, when he took his position upon it.

Then like a bugle blast came his command: "Leap!" and the Tom-cat instantly shot downward, to be rescued in the manner detailed.

"Thar'll be lively yowlin' over this," he cried, as Brentwood cut his bonds.

"No doubt," Brentwood replied smiling. "Do you suppose they will try to follow?"

"Shouldn't think they would. It's a powerful distance an' they can't know what's down here."

He placed an arm lovingly around Molly's waist and kissed her as he said it.

"If you refer to Molly, I don't think they do. But it won't take them long to find that I'm gone. However, they can't get down easy, unless that girl pilots them."

"Which she won't do!" Molly asserted. "She sets a big store by you."

A torch was flickering near, and by its light the pained look on the detective's face was clearly visible.

"Best put that out!" advised the Tom-cat, seizing the torch and extinguishing it.

"Hello! What's that?"

The form of a man was dimly visible, dangling over the precipice.

Brentwood drew his revolver and fired a hasty shot, not with the intention of hitting the man, but as a warning.

"The girl hasn't told of the other route yet, at any rate; and I hardly think they'll try that again."

"How do you happen to be among these men?" Molly asked, when the outlaw had been drawn from sight.

"Yes!" put in the cowboy. "That's what I'm a-akin' to know, myself."

"Strictly in the line of business, of course," with a light laugh. "I am gunning for those fellows above, and joined them to learn their secrets. I've been with them something over a month now. It was only after Molly's capture that I knew of this lair behind the falls. The way to this place is what I most wanted to know; and I would have left then for a force of men if it had not been for Molly. I didn't know the Tom-cat was hunting the same game or I would have joined hands with him at the outset."

"Ef I only had my fellers in hyer, we could take 'em now!" exclaimed the cowboy.

Then he spoke of the men who were waiting for him at Painted Rock.

"Things has whirled along so fast that I've kinder lost the run o' time, lately. I 'low the week's nighabout up."

"Yes, and it will be quite up before we get out of here," replied Brentwood. That is, if we get out at all, which looks rather doubtful. I'm sorry you didn't let the men know you reached Devil's Mountain.

"If they should go back, though, Cliff Curtis will take the main trail, with a big force, at once," Molly asserted, hopefully. "I know that him and Mrs. Curtis have been on nettles the whole week."

"I move we build a fire!" said Brentwood, whose teeth were chattering from the effects of his recent cold bath. "Those chaps won't try to come down that way again."

A brief search showed, however, that there was nothing with which a fire could be made. So the only thing they could do to restore their chilled circulation, was to walk briskly backward and forward and thrash their arms about like revolving wind-mills.

"Now that we've got a little of the ice out of our blood, I propose that we explore this place," Brentwood said, when they had continued their exercise for some time.

The suggestion was an agreeable one. The discovery of an outlet from their prison would solve a very unpleasant dilemma. If no outlet could be found, they were apparently doomed.

Brentwood relighted the torch with some matches he carried in a waterproof case; and the three set out along the margin of the subterranean river.

They had proceeded but a little distance when the keen eyes of the Tom-cat were attracted to the peculiar appearance of the rocky wall.

"Shine yer light on that ag'in, will ye?" he cried, grasping Brentwood's arm, excitedly.

The torch was thrust close to the rocky surface.

"Silver quartz, er I'm a gopher! An' rich as cheese! We've struck it big, ef we ever get out o' hyer."

The Tom-cat's exultant exclamations were echoed by Brentwood and Molly; and for a time they gave little thought to anything but their great find. They were thoroughly familiar with the characteristics of silver-bearing rock, and knew that the quartz before them was, as the Tom-cat said, "rich as cheese."

The Black Imp would jes' cork hisself ef he knew o' this. A Comstock lode right under him an' him never know it. Why, thar's more wealth hyer than he could gether in ten years, at the road-agent business. That gal didn't know what a favor she was conferrin' on you, Molly, when she corraled you in this place. Ef she had she'd a-scratched her purty eyes out afore she'd a-done it."

"But we're not out o' here yet!" Molly reminded him. "And more, I'm afraid we won't get out. Silver is awfully nice, but we can't eat it, you know."

"Molly is right," said Brentwood, recalled to the perils of their position. "We've found a fortune, but we must get out of here to make it of any use."

The cowboy turned from the wall with a sigh, and they resumed their quest for some avenue of escape. For hours they wandered about, exploring every nook and corner of the cavern. Then, as the oil in their tin torch was almost exhausted, they returned to the point of starting.

"Ef we was on'y fishes!" said the Tom-cat, dropping moodily and wearily upon the sand.

"Why fishes?" Molly questioned.

"We could swim out with the river."

"There's only one thing to be done!" Brentwood asserted, with a look of grim determination. "I'll have to work my way through the outlaws above, and bring up the men from Painted Rock."

#### CHAPTER XVI.

##### A BOLD GAME.

"NARY time!" cried the cowboy. "Ef thar's any work o' that kind to be done, I'm the one to do it."

"And get shot for your trouble! You couldn't go through the cavern without discovery, and that would now mean certain and instant death."

"How do you propose to work it? Seems like I mou't go through ef you could."

"By becoming Tim Carlton again," Brentwood answered. "I'll manufacture some sort of a story to explain my absence, and go boldly among them, as if nothing had occurred."

The Tom-cat vigorously demurred, but Brentwood was determined, and defended the plan with great ardor.

"Ef you're set on it, hanged ef I don't go with ye to the edge of the chamber an' see 'at ye don't git eat up. Ef they shake their rattles too loud you kin listen fer the Tom-cat's howl."

"No!" protested Molly, who was thoroughly familiar with her husband's recklessness in time of excitement. "I'm afraid you'd jump in before you had any call to."

Brentwood also feared the same and joined in her protestations.

"An' ye 'low I kin set in this hole an' jes' gnaw my claws like a b'ar in a blizzard, while somebody else is a-doin' the fightin'? Well, I jes' can't."

"You must!" Brentwood insisted. "There will be no fighting, and you would only expose yourself to capture for nothing. I am sure I can get through by a little strategy."

As he said it, he took one of the heavy revolvers from his hips and handed it to the cowboy.

"You may need that. Don't leave this place until you are starved out. I may have to go to Silver City for help."

Then he shook hands with them gravely, bade them good-by, and started on his perilous mission.

The departure of Brentwood depressed the cowboy greatly. For a long time he sat as if expecting the sounds of a conflict.

"Couldn't hear a earthquake!" he growled.

"That pesky creek roars like a cyclone!"

Then they fell to wondering what had befallen Brentwood, and from this drifted to talk of the silver discovery and of the prospects of escape.

Brentwood, having resumed his disguises, proceeded slowly and thoughtfully along the passage leading to the upper cavern. He had some slight hopes that he might be able to pass the men without discovery. They never rose very high, however, and, as he crawled and walked along the devious route, he racked his brain for a story by which he might plausibly account for his absence.

"It will require a bold front to carry me through!" he soliloquized. "They can't know, though, that I have been down in the Devil's Tea-kettle. I've got to face the music and take the chances."

When the camp-fire became visible, he saw that it was surrounded by armed men. They appeared to be resting in momentary expectation of an attack.

"I guess they hardly know what to look for," he muttered. "They have failed to make any discoveries, and are simply awaiting the revelation of events."

He halted a moment, like a swimmer hesitating to plunge; then walked carelessly into the cavern and approached the fire.

A rocket exploding in their midst could not have created a greater furor. The road agents swarmed about him with excited questions and angry ejaculations; and loud cries were sent up for Black Ivan.

"What's the matter?" demanded Carlton, with well-feigned surprise.

Before they could reply, Black Ivan strode into their midst.

"You dog!" he hissed, scowling blackly at Carlton. "I'm amazed at your audacity!"

"Why, what have I done?" cried the detective.

"What haven't you done?" was the fierce rejoinder.

"Blest if I know what all I haven't done,"

"a light laugh. "Perhaps you can tell me. I can only speak of acts committed. For the life of me, though, I don't see what this hubbub is about!"

"Look here, Tim Carlton! Where have you been for the last two or three hours? Talk straight. Yarns won't answer!"

"Lost!" cried the detective, apparently greatly relieved.

"Lost?"

"Yes. I've got a story to tell, if you'll give me a chance to tell it. While you were getting ready to execute the Tom-cat I thought I heard voices back there in those passages. I wasn't quite certain, and so slipped away without saying anything to you about it. I was afraid, though, that the cowboy's men, if he had any, had found a way to get in and were preparing to attack us from the rear.

"After I'd gone a little ways, I heard the voice or voices again. Then in a few minutes, I heard a shot, I couldn't tell which way the sounds came from; and in wandering about I became so turned around I couldn't find my way back."

"A very pretty and ingenious story!" sneered the chief. "How long did it take you to concoct it?"

Brentwood flushed and began a denial. At that supreme moment his acting was superb.

"I suppose you don't know where the Tom-cat is at the present time?"

"Is? Why, the fellow's dead!"

A mystified look came into his eyes as he made the assertion.

"And you think so?"

"Why, to be sure! I'm certain I heard the rifles and a man filled with bullets wouldn't be very apt to climb out of the Devil's Teakettle."

The detective's coolness enraged while it puzzled the chief.

"I'm afraid, Carlton, I'll have to accuse you of lying. I don't know how you did it, but you've been to the bottom of the Devil's Teakettle. You shouted to the Tom-cat, and when he leaped in, no doubt you rescued him."

"Then he escaped?" with quick apprehension. "I was not so greatly mistaken, after all! I don't blame you for suspecting me, Ivan. The Tom-cat must have had men in readiness and they've got into the chasm below by some passage unknown to us. That accounts for the voices I heard!"

The chief was evidently perplexed, Carlton's ready replies and candid air seemed truthful and real.

"But your clothes are damp!"

The detective's garments still clung to him with sticky tenacity.

"Yes, I know they are. I floundered into a hole, somewhere back there, over an hour ago. I don't know where I went to in trying to get out, but I came near breaking my neck a score of times by tumbling into pit-falls. The passages wind in every direction and are so narrow at some points that I had to crawl."

Black Ivan was watching him closely.

Notwithstanding his apparent candor, Carlton had been for some time moving about in an uneasy way. The restless movements were not without a purpose. He was slowly edging through the crowd in the direction of the waterfall, hoping that, if his story was not believed, he could escape by a bold dash.

An inkling of this idea came into the chief's mind, as he scanned Carlton's face.

"Stop where you are!" he thundered. "I see through your little plan. Take him, men! He is a liar and traitor."

His revolver gleamed in the firelight, and the angry road-agents sprang quickly forward to obey.

Believing that his design had been really penetrated, Carlton turned to run. The men in front of him, however, barred his progress.

"Out of my way!" he hissed, striking swift blows right and left. "Out of my way, you devils!"

His form seemed to expand and his eyes blazed with a desperate light.

Ivan raised his revolver, then lowered it again, as he saw he could not fire without endangering others.

"Take him alive!" he shouted. "He can take the Tom-cat's place!"

The cavern rung with excited cries, as the outlaws crowded about the struggling detective. He fought like an aroused giant. But his ruggles were useless. The men bore him down mere weight of numbers.

A moment later he stood before the angry chief, ringed in by threatening revolvers.

"I suppose you will still cling to your lies?"

sneered Black Ivan, as he noted Carlton's defiant look.

"Yes, though I know you don't believe it. I saw you were determined to kill me and so tried to get away. Perhaps you wouldn't do the same under like circumstances?"

"You're a traitor, Carlton, and you deserve a traitor's death. I think you have been deceiving me all along. I intend to mete out to you the fate which the Tom-cat escaped. But, you needn't imagine you will have an opportunity to do as he did. We'll make a sieve out of your worthless carcass and then pitch it to the fishes—if there are any fishes in the Devil's Teakettle."

He stepped quickly forward, and, before anyone was aware of his intentions, snatched the hat from the detective's head, and with it the wig, which the latter wore!

A deep growl went up as Carlton's duplicity was thus proven.

"Kill the dog!" was the universal cry. "The sneakin' coyote. He's been playin' it powerful fine."

"I suppose you still stick to your story?" Ivan again queried, with a mocking smile, as he waved the tell-tale wig before the detective's staring eyes.

At that moment Brentwood lost hope. He knew he could expect no mercy from those irate men. By them, human life was held as lightly as the turning of a card. They were not likely now, to be moved by compassion. Murder was a part of their trade and, in a case like this, it would certainly hold no horrors for them.

"Kill me!" he cried, fearing that he would be subjected to some devilish torture. "Have done with your palavering, and kill me! I would rather be a true man, dead, than a living criminal."

The bold words so infuriated the road-agents, that they seemed on the point of tearing him limb from limb.

"Back!" cried the chief. "We're not wolves. Traitors to this band die by the bullet."

He waved his hand and a half-dozen men promptly formed in a line and leveled their revolvers.

A wild scream rung through the cavern, and Hazel Thornpath dashed forward and hurled an armful of blankets upon the fire. Instantly the cavern was plunged in darkness. Carlton felt a soft hand thrust into his.

"Come!" whispered a low voice; and, accompanied by Hazel, he sprang into the passage leading to the waterfall, leaving the outlaws cursing and fuming in their blind rage.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### A DISAGREEABLE INTERVIEW.

FROM the gloom of impending death to the blazing noonday of hope! Brentwood could scarcely realize the sudden change. His brain whirled tumultuously. He felt that he must be dreaming and that recent events were all parts of some strange phantasmagoria.

But the pressure of the soft hand, together with the excited yells behind him, aroused him from this peculiar mental state.

The smothering blankets had been dragged from the fire, and the light, penetrating the passage, hastened their flight.

"Be quick!" urged Hazel, almost dragging him forward.

The crash of revolvers and the patter of balls added force to her words. With a few bounds they reached the sheltering bend and hurried with all speed, toward the tumbling cascade.

"You have nothing to protect you from the water!" he said, characteristically thoughtful, even at that moment.

"A little wetting doesn't matter. I've gone through the falls in these garments, many a time."

She panted the words in her excitement. She had dropped his hand and now ran at his side with the speed of a frightened fawn.

Hurriedly they dashed through the falls and a little later, stood shivering beneath the starry sky. Brentwood assisted Hazel up the rocky slope and across the little divide. The sounds of pursuit were drowned by the roar of waters, but they knew that the road-agents would be on their trail almost immediately, and hastened on as rapidly as possible.

"This way," said Hazel, who was thoroughly familiar with the country. "Let's keep near this gulch. We can hide in it if they press us too closely."

"I want to go toward Painted Rock!" Carlton replied, reminded of his mission. Then he hesitated, not knowing whether it would be safe to trust her with so important a secret.

She was evidently surprised, but said nothing and they ran on through the darkness.

"Why Painted Rock?" she questioned, finally. "I thought you would want to go to Silver City."

"It's a rough country, thereabouts, and a good place to hide in," he said, evasively. "I do want to go to Silver City, but we can't reach it to-night."

"Painted Rock is so far out of the way!" Hazel protested, as they turned in that direction. "We will lose precious time by going there. I want you to take me direct to Silver City."

There was something in her tones that gave him an uncomfortable start.

"I have a good reason for my wish, Hazel: I will tell you what it is when we can safely stop to rest. Now, I can only ask you to be guided by me in the matter."

She became moodily silent and for more than an hour, scarcely a word was spoken by either.

The night was now well advanced; and although Brentwood had almost lost the run of time, he knew it could not be long until daylight. Hazel began to show signs of weariness.

"We are not far from Painted Rock, and I propose we indulge in a short rest. We are almost safe now, I think. At least until daylight."

As he said this, Carlton seated himself on a convenient stone.

"I thought you would never stop!" she cried, pettishly. "I am completely tired out!"

She composed herself gracefully in a half-reclining attitude at his side.

Brentwood hardly heard her complaints. His thoughts just then were of the extra-troublesome kind. He feared that a disagreeable interview was before him.

He would have been blind if he had not long ago discovered that this wild, mountain beauty loved him. He knew that she was impelled by this love when she took such terrible risks to rescue him from death. By that act she had become the open enemy of her father and his band of renegades. She could not go back to them. Where was she to go? What was to become of her?

Brentwood's regard for her was only that of mere friendship. Although she did not know it, he had a wife and children.

"Poor thing!" he thought. "I am afraid she has wrecked her life, if it was not already wrecked by her training and surroundings. Curtis could provide her with a home. So could Molly. But she would accept help from neither of them. It's a sad affair, and I wish I was well out of it."

He sighed deeply, all the while unconscious that Hazel was furtively watching him. She could not see his features with any distinctness, but the sigh spoke volumes.

"You were to tell me about Painted Rock," she reminded, toying nervously with the knot of soiled ribbon at her throat.

"Yes; and I'm a little afraid the story will not please you. You remember, the Tom-cat spoke of a force of men. They are rendezvoused there—"

"And you are going to lead them back to the cave!" she interrupted, with jealous energy.

"I certainly am!"

"That's what I feared!"

"Why, you wouldn't expect me to leave the Tom-cat and Molly there?" with questioning surprise.

"I ought to have known you wouldn't. And yet—"

She was trembling now.

"Carlton! Carlton!" she exclaimed, passionately. "If you bring Molly here, what will become of me?"

"Why, I don't see—"

"Then you are blind, Tim Carlton! Do you suppose I rescued you to give you up to Molly Tenderden? Oh, what am I saying? I am wild! I am foolish! But I can't help it, Carlton. I risked my life because I loved you; and do you suppose I can keep quiet now?"

She was sobbing and crying with the vehemence of a child.

"I know I'm not like other women, Carlton. You're shocked at my confession. I was reared differently. I have read and studied, and studied and read until my head ached, but for all that, I don't know anything about what you'd call society. I believe it's the proper thing for the man to come a-wooing. At any rate, that's the way they do in story-books. But story-books aren't real life, and circumstances always alter cases. If the man won't come a-wooing, what then?"

She grew calmer as she talked.

"Yes, I'm foolish, Carlton. Foolish to let my

heart run away with my head as it has done. But I did think I could win your love, and I believe I could have done so if Molly Tenterden hadn't come between us. My life has been bleak and blank—oh, so bleak and blank and lonely! And when you came I thought it was all to change. But you turned from me, and now you are deaf to all I say, although I have left father and everything for your sake!"

"Not deaf, Hazel. Only pained beyond the power of words to express. You have gone on like a torrent, and given me no chance for explanation. Hazel, I am already married, and the father of a family."

She started to her feet with a horrified cry.

"Yes, Hazel; I ought to have told you before, but I couldn't, so long as I remained with your father's men. I couldn't bring myself to trust the secret, even to you. You know me as Tim Carlton, the road-agent. I am, really, Bruce Brentwood, the detective. If you saw what took place just before you rescued me, you may have guessed something of the kind."

"You have saved my life, and I acknowledge I owe you a debt of gratitude I can never pay. But I will do everything I can to aid you. If you care to go to Silver City I will see that you are provided with a home among good people, where you can begin life anew."

He was sitting with bowed head in the gray of the coming twilight, not daring to look at her. Hazel was ominously silent.

"I am extremely sorry," he went on, scarcely knowing how to interpret her quietness, "that you ever conceived or expressed any attachment for me. I am sure I never gave you cause. I was especially careful on that point. I aimed to be your friend, nothing more."

"The stereotyped statement," her anger bursting forth like the sudden fire of a smothered volcano. "I don't believe a word you say! I won't believe it. You men are all alike, liars! You are deceiving me, and have tried to deceive me from the first!"

She drew herself up, quivering with violent rage.

"Won't you listen to reason?" he asked, lifting a hand as if he feared she meant to strike him. "That silly jealousy of Molly has completely poisoned you. I can see that you are thinking of her. Molly is a true and loving wife, Hazel. A better woman never lived. I esteem her as one of my best friends. Your jealousy simply insults her, that is all."

"You can talk loudly, now you are out of danger!" she hissed. "But if you are out of danger, your friends are not."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, also rising.

"The Tom-cat and Molly will never leave the cavern alive!"

"You cannot do that! You will not do that!" with a quick step forward as he began to comprehend her intentions.

"I will!" she asserted, with the fierceness of a tigress. "You planned the escape of the Tom-cat and they are both at the bottom of the Devil's Tea-kettle. Oh, you have been base in your deceptions, Carlton! I know you must have followed me when I led Molly there. But they will never get out! Never!"

"I intend to show Ivan where they are. And as for you, if you bring up the men from Painted Rock, you will all be killed together."

She leaped backward, laughing like one whose brain is turned.

"Stop!" he cried. "You won't do that?"

"Won't I? Ha, ha, ha!"

She laughed again in that blood-chilling way, and before he could reach and detain her, bounded off over the bowlders like an antelope.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CONCLUSION.

BRENTWOOD saw it was useless to chase her. Without waiting to see whether she continued on her way, he hurried toward the rendezvous.

"Their fate is sealed if the men are gone!" he continued, thinking of the prisoners in the cavern. "At the best, the chances are much against them. It will push me to bring the men up in time to be of service."

Fortunately, Painted Rock was not far distant. He could see it plainly, its proportions lined against the background of blue-black sky; and the bands of color, which gave it its name, visible in the first glow of sunrise.

"If they are only there!" he panted, running with swift speed toward the canyon.

But this train of thought was broken in an abrupt way, when he reached the edge of the scrub. A rifle was pushed above a rock and a hoarse voice shouted:

"Hands up, er I'll bore ye!"

The rifle was followed by an enormous white hat, beneath which were a pair of keen eyes and a bearded face.

"What air ye tumblin' along in sech a pesky hurry fer, pardner? Is it Injuns er road-agents? Or be you jest a-exercisin' fer your health?"

Although pleased, Brentwood was a little startled by the suddenness of the command.

"Don't know me, eh?" coaxing a smile to his face.

"Blest ef I do, pardner! An' I don't know ez I want to! Hain't many men 'round Devil's Mountain wu'th knowin'."

"Take me to your leader, quick!" urged Brentwood, feeling that he was wasting time in useless talk with the sentinel. "He will know me, I'm sure. If not, he knows the Tom-cat, and I was sent by him."

"Weepons first," commanded the man, stretching out his hand. "Them's orders. No man's Brentwood handed over his revolvers; and the sentinel then consented to lead the way into the canyon."

Luckily the leader of the party was well acquainted with the detective, and exasperating explanations and delay were unnecessary.

"We hav'n't a minute to lose!" Brentwood began, plunging headlong into his subject.

Then he told, briefly, how the Tom-cat had sent him to them; of his capture, rescue, and the recent threats and departure of Hazel.

"I'm afraid that we can't overtake her! She was running like a deer when I saw her last. Still, I hope she will exhaust herself at that furious speed, and be unable to go on."

To his joy he saw that there were horses in the canyon! They could be utilized. Although the way was very rough and precipitous, mounted men could proceed faster than men on foot.

The men, who had crowded eagerly about him while his story was being told, began preparations at once for the journey. Rifles and revolvers were quickly got in readiness, and, as soon as the horses were brought up they started, leaving behind all the camp equipage, and everything that might prove an incumbrance.

"Do you think we will have sufficient force?" asked the leader, surveying the score of well-armed men that followed him. "I sent off two of my fellows yesterday. The week is nearly up, and as the Tom-cat didn't appear, I thought I'd better communicate with Curtis and get orders."

"The road-agents outnumbered us," was the reply, "but I'm in hopes we'll not be compelled to fight them all. The greater part of them were out in the hills, last night, and, if we can get to the cave before they return, I'll have no fears of the result. Unless—" and he anxiously scanned the faraway slopes before them, "that girl gets there first."

And what of Hazel who had bounded away with brain so passion-fired and so raging with a hell of fury, hate and scorn that it seemed trembling to insanity?

Lately, she had been weary and almost exhausted. Now, the tonic of fierce excitement lent her wonderful strength and fleetness. She leaped, she ran, she scaled rocky heights, regardless of bruises or falls, torn clothing or bleeding hands.

"And I saved him for this! For this!" she moaned, as she plunged on through the morning sunshine.

Nature, even though buoyed by such tumultuous passions, could not withstand so terrible a strain. Her breath came in hot, stifling gasps; her brain grew giddy; and her trembling limbs almost refused to support her.

"I must go on!" she panted as she stopped for a moment's rest. "I must! I must!! Oh, God! what am I doing? My head feels like it was on fire."

She brushed the tangled hair back from her throbbing temples and glared about with the look of a maniac.

"He would have loved me if it hadn't been for Molly. He says he don't care for her. Perhaps he don't. But, he would have loved me if she hadn't been brought here."

Then she began a furious tirade against Ivan for bringing Molly there.

"Oh, I could kill them all: and then lay down my life, satisfied. That's what I'll do! That's what I'll do."

She tottered on, apparently gaining strength as she proceeded.

"Yes, I'll kill them all. I won't tell Ivan of the men at Painted Rock. I'll lead him to the Devil's Tea-kettle and then—and then—those men will come in and blood will flow! Perhaps Carlton's blood!"

On, on, she stumbled, her eyes filled with a glare of insanity, muttering revengeful and incoherent sentences.

Then, after what appeared to her, hours, she reached the falls and dashed into the cavern.

Ivan was there and greeted her with words of angry surprise.

"Come back have you, you jade?"

She reeled and fell at his feet.

"They are there!" she gasped, raising herself on an elbow. "There, through that passage—at the bottom of the Devil's Tea-kettle!"

"What do you mean, girl?" he demanded, as he caught the crazed look in her eyes.

"The Tom-cat and Molly! They are there! I can show you the way."

"You are crazy! Where is Carlton? Why did you interfere last night? Where have you been?"

"Crazy? My God! I believe I am. My brain spins like a top! But, I mustn't give up to it. Come! I swore I would show you where the Tom-cat is. I will do it."

She attempted to rise, but reeled and fell again at his feet. A numbing weakness swept over her.

"Give me some whisky!" she pleaded. "Brandy! Anything to put a little life into me!"

"Do you hear that?" Ivan roared to the men who had gathered about them. "Some whisky, quick! I believe she is dying."

He dropped at her side, and, with nervous haste, sought for the pulse at her wrist. One of the men darted away, soon returning with liquor-bottle, water and glasses.

Ivan poured a quantity of the fiery liquor into one of the glasses, diluted it, and held it to her lips. The potent draught brought the color into her cheeks.

In a little while her strength returned. Then she sat up, and the old fire of insane hate and jealousy again flashed from her black orbs.

She leaped to her feet, seized a lighted torch, and hurried toward the passage opposite.

"I am afraid she's crazy!" the chief whispered to his men. "But, we'll follow her, anyway. Something may come of it."

He placed some guards in the passage near the waterfall, and with the other members of the band present, hurried after Hazel.

She pressed forward with such speed that they could scarcely keep pace with her. Over the rocks and through the narrow apertures she scrambled, heedless or unconscious of pain or fatigue.

Evidently the Tom-cat heard them coming, for, when they reached the bottom of the Devil's Tea-kettle, he was crouched behind a rock, in readiness for an attack and Molly was nowhere to be seen.

"Come on, ye devils!" he cried. "Whoop! Mariar! Meow-ow-ow!"

His revolver cracked and one of the foremost men tumbled to the sand.

At the same instant a ringing cheer came from the dark passage in the rear of the road-agents. Brentwood had arrived with his force of rescuers. They had swept the sentinels before them like chaff!

Ivan's men instantly turned to repel this new foe; then the fight became general and deadly. High over all sounded the peculiar war-cry of the Tom-cat, who, as always in times of perilous conflict, performed prodigies of valor.

The fight raged in almost total darkness, for the torches were extinguished at the first onset. But, it was short, as all hand-to-hand combats must be. When it was over many dead were found. Among them was Hazel Thornpath, her face in the repose of death, seeming as peaceful and lovely as an infant's. Perhaps it was as well. Life had held for her but little of joy or hope.

Only a few of the outlaws escaped; but Black Ivan was of the number. He fled with hot and bitter thoughts, vowing a terrible revenge on the Tom-cat!

Before the lapse of two months one of the magic cities of Silverland had sprung into being on the rocky slopes of Devil's Mountain. It was called into life by the Tom-cat's wonderful find of silver; and in the first issue of its paper the following card appeared in bold, black letters:

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